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A RUINED GIRL

KATE SIMANTS



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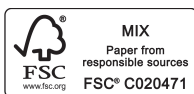
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Night. Real, dense, outdoors night. Nothing like the safe, half-lit gloom he's known from a life in the city. Here, the trees all around hold the darkness tight, pressing it in. Behind him, the distant thrum of the M32, but so low and constant that it's just a layer under the silence, like silt. Apart from that, nothing. Just the thud and scrape of his spade striking the earth, pulling loose, striking again.

There's a ghost of rain, cold and drifting so fine it might as well be dust, sticking to everything. But the boy isn't cold, because digging is hard, hard work. Has he ever even done it before? At his old house? He remembers the garden as he brings the spade down. The flowers. They spread and bloom in his mind, and he colours them in reds and purples and blues and the world is made vivid again. His mum grew them; he must have helped. He must have gardened.

But that wasn't the same as this. Gardening is for growing things. This is something else.

The spade is starting to grind now that he's getting further down. The top layer was easy: twigs and leaves and mulch all softened from the winter above and the rot below. Now, waist-deep, it's getting stony. He stops, breathing hard. He lets the long handle fall against the side of the pit – he'll call it a pit, because

that's as far as he can let this go, in his head. He pushes his fists into his spine, gets his breath back. Listening, watchful, although he's been here enough times to know how rare visitors are. Without passing by boat, on the water that's just a few feet away, it would be hard to know the clearing was here at all. He turns to watch the river, immense and silent, sliding blindly west towards Bristol, and then Avonmouth, and then the sea. He thinks of the thing they did at school about the water table. If he digs any deeper, any minute now he's going to hit it.

His pit isn't as deep as he wanted, but it'll have to do. He turns to tell the man, but he has to scan the blackness for a moment until he spots him, crouching, at the edge of the clearing. Head in his hands. Could be crying. The boy doesn't care.

He climbs out of the pit and switches on the torch, keeping the beam low to the ground. Right at the edge, there's the girl. Lying on her side exactly where he set her down. Facing him.

He wipes his forehead with the back of his sleeve. Considering the size of her, considering how he could practically circle her waist with his hands, getting her here from the car they had parked maybe half a mile away was like carrying a sack of rocks. Dead weight: that's what it's called. He had to keep shifting the load, her stomach folded across his shoulder. Closer to her than he'd ever dreamed, his hand splayed across the back of her thigh, holding her steady in the fireman's lift. The man could have done it but the boy wouldn't let him. That was the deal. He'd go along with whatever the man told him afterwards, but they would do this part his way.

He closes his eyes now and runs it back, cementing the feel of her in his memory. The swish of her hair, hanging down behind him, thick enough to feel it brush against his jeans. He replays the sensations of it, the bounce of her hands against the backs of his knees. Had he felt the contours of her chest, upside down, below his shoulder blades? Yes. He tells himself it's real, something recalled, not imagined. He had felt that. And the warmth of her skin, even through the clothes? Yes.

The beating of her heart?

He opens his eyes. Swallows hard.

Yes. He wants it badly enough, so he takes the blank and fills it with the detail and then it's there, in his version of it, for good. He remembers it all.

Half covered with the battered tarp, she is motionless. The tips of his fingers sing with the desire to reach out and touch her. They ache with it. The drizzle has sunk into her hair, binding the strands into damp cords; it's settled into a sheen on her face, catching scraps of light that skitter across the ground as the canopy of leaves shifts above them. Her eyes are closed. Her black-and-red checked shirt clings in sodden folds around her, and the tarp lifts and falls in the breeze, as if it is breathing. And she is beautiful.

She is beautiful.

He forces himself to look away, and pulls the sheet up over her head. Then he calls over to the man in a low voice.

'Ready.'

It's not a question. It's a command. He is in charge.

The man rises like he's a hundred years old, like it's the hardest thing he's ever had to do. Hands shoved deep in his pockets he comes over, close to where she's lying.

'Anyone finds it,' he says, jerking his chin towards her, 'it's on you.'

'I know,' the boy says.

'I still think we should burn it.'

The boy shakes his head, but the man is eyeing him. Wants convincing. So the boy says, 'The rain. Too damp. And even if we could, there'd be the smoke. The smell. Not worth the risk. This way is better.'

The man prods at the shape under the tarp with the toe of his shoe. 'Let's get it done then.'

'No!' The boy's shout is thin and high with panic, and the man snaps round and his eyes shine silver in the darkness. He puts his hands up, surrendering.

'Jesus. What?'

'Don't even fucking touch her,' the boy says. Spits it. And it's all he can do not to drive him into the pit instead of her. Grab the spade and swing the edge against the side of his head. But he doesn't do it. He made a promise.

Because she is his. Seven months he's loved her, and tonight he's done something for her that no one else could do, and no one else will ever know, and he will do every part of it himself, and that means she's his. It makes her his. He breathes hard, staring at the man. Teeth tight. He could kill him. He could.

The man steps back. 'Do it then,' he says. 'Go on.'

And the boy does. He sits at the edge of the pit like he's getting into a pool, and he lowers himself down. Gets his hands underneath her armpits, careful to keep as much of her covered with the tarp as he can. He starts to pull. At first she doesn't move, and then there's the sound of a tear, fabric, and oh god he hopes he hasn't hurt her. He winces, but he keeps pulling, and all of a sudden the resistance is gone and she pitches in, shoulders hitting him awkwardly against the fronts of his thighs. He staggers back, recovers, and lowers her down. Softly. Soundless.

He moves her so she's lying on her side, her back to the man, and lays the tarp out again, taking care to keep it a little way from her face.

'What are you doing?' the man says. 'It's not like she's going to suffocate.'

The boy takes a last look at her, at the smears of black under her eyes, the tiny silver gem-studded star at her neck on a chain so fine you almost don't see it. And then he starts to climb out.

Until the man says, 'Hold on.'

'What?'

From his pocket, the man brings out a flick-knife. He tosses it down, and the boy catches it.

The man half turns away, his lip curled like she is something disgusting. 'Clothes.'

The boy's heart stops still.

'Her clothes,' the man says again. 'They'll have fibres on them. From both of us – our hair. Particles. Say they find her. You want them finding those?'

The boy says nothing. The knife is impossibly heavy in his hand.

'Cut them off,' the man tells him. 'We're going to burn them. And ours, to make sure.'

The boy looks down at her. The rain is still falling, little puddles forming, black like oil.

He can't take her clothes. He can hardly bear to leave her in a pit, but naked? No.

'Now,' the man says. 'Or the deal's off.'

And so the boy doesn't have any choice. His heart convulsing in his throat, he kneels.

'Turn your back,' he tells the man.

'What?'

'I said turn your back. You don't get to look at her. Not... not like this.'

The man gives him a look of pure hatred. But he does what he's told and turns around.

The boy puts the knife in his back pocket, folds the tarp off, and rolls her onto her back. Her hair spreads like a wing over her face. He unbuttons her jeans, lifts her hips, and pulls, whispering, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' so quietly he can hardly hear it over the tapping of the rain. He won't look at her.

A bird screams overhead.

'Get the fuck on with it,' the man says over his shoulder.

Through barely open eyes, the boy finishes the job, but he doesn't use the knife. He does it tenderly, without lingering. All of it: the shirt, jeans, socks. The rest. He piles the clothes beside him, covers her over again.

'Done.'

'Necklace,' the man says, peering down.

'I said don't look—'

Necklace,' the man says again, snarling now.

The boy does as he's told. And when it's done, her hair catches around his fingers. As he unwinds it, careful not to uproot a single thread, he thinks of something else.

He looks up. 'What about her hair?'

'What about it?'

The boy blinks against the intensifying rain. 'Fibres. There'll be my hair in hers, probably.' He doesn't know if that's how it works, but the idea is taking hold now. He has to convince him. 'And yours. If they can find fibres on her clothes, I mean, why not in her hair? Not worth the risk.'

The man flinches, nods. 'Cut it then. Close as you can. Wrap it in the clothes, we'll burn it all later.'

The boy grunts, takes the knife back out, and flips it open. This time, he doesn't waste a moment.

'I have to,' he whispers to her. 'I'm sorry. I have to.'

He doesn't know it yet, but what he's doing now, it's going to be the cage around every dream he'll have for the rest of his life. And each one of those dreams, from which he'll wake choking for breath as if someone has forced an icy fist down through his mouth and taken hold of his heart, will end the same. An image of the girl he loved harder than anyone, the girl he would have given his life for, if she would have only let him do it, if it might have made her love him back:

Her skin, white as bone, streaked with earth and rain. The last filaments of her hair falling from her scalp as she stands, naked, her arms loose against the sides of her living, perfect body. Her smile as she comes closer and closer until her face is against his.

And her breath in his ear, and her voice, as soft as a blanket of snow.

'Thank you. Thank you.'

1

Now

Wren Reynolds pulls into the designated *Probation Service* bay, puts the Corsa out of its misery, and huffs at her hands. Almost March, but cold as midwinter. To her right, long wet stretches of overnight rain have darkened the concrete under the windows of B-Wing. Behind it lies a cloudless sky.

On the passenger seat, she finds the printout of the room booking. CBo09, Community Building. The newest addition to the complex, tucked behind the original red-brick Victorian edifice and clad, inexplicably, in dusky pink weatherboard. Cold, clean air floods the car as she opens the door. The day is brisk and bright. The kind of morning a person would hope for, if they were planning a fresh start.

Her offender has six days left inside. Numerically speaking, at a few weeks off twenty-one years old, he's still a young man. But considering the average stay in Bristol is around seven months, with the best part of three years under his belt he'll be the grandfather of B-wing, part of the bolted-down furniture. One thing she knows: inmates do not come out the same as they go in, not if they serve as long as he has. Not even physically. He could be skinnier or fatter by now, or could have bulked himself up with weights and chin-ups the way they sometimes did. She recalls the photo in her file of the eighteen-year-old boy he'd been when he was sentenced:

heavy forehead and the dark, blank glare. Impenetrable, near-black eyes a person could trip into and never hit the bottom.

Wren takes a breath, then nods to herself. She's ready. She gathers her things: handbag, phone, files. Props, really; anonymous shields. It was the first thing she'd learned in training, day one, lesson one: don't give them anything of yourself. No pictures of your partner in your wallet, no mention of your kids, neighbourhood – nothing. Next to her, another student had asked a question. *Are you saying they're still criminals then, when they've finished their sentence?* The tutor, a PO himself, had laughed drily, and the students had joined in as if they understood. And for the sake of fitting in Wren had smiled, she remembers now, as she flips down the visor and smears on a layer of muted pink lipstick that she doesn't really like. But she hadn't laughed.

You had to try to believe in redemption. Forgiveness. You had to at least *pretend*.

She fishes under the passenger seat for the flask of coffee Suzy had left on the kitchen table for her, then gets out. Her shoes clack on the tarmac as she heads towards the entrance, sending a report across the still-empty car park. Beyond the buildings, an amplified voice orders prisoners around in the yard, the sound of it cutting through the drone of the traffic arteries to the east. The place is only just coming to life, and Wren is deliberately early. He is still theirs, but on the cusp of probation. This is the overlap of past and future, of incarceration and what comes next.

The reception doors slide open and she lifts the lanyard round her neck to show the ID card hanging from it. The woman behind the acrylic screen leans closer, pushes her glasses up her nose and peers at it.

'*Community Atonement Programme*,' she reads slowly, then turns her suspicious gaze up to Wren's face before softening

in recognition. ‘Oh right. It’s you. What do you do now, then?’

‘Same as ever,’ Wren says, shrugging. ‘Whisk them away for a new life free from crime.’

They deadpan that for a moment together before the woman breaks into a grin. ‘Really, though?’

‘It’s still probation,’ Wren says, looping the card off her neck and sliding it into the metal tray. ‘It’s the accelerated-release thing. CAP.’

The receptionist’s face is pinched with the effort of dredging her memory.

‘It’s been on the news?’ Wren offers.

‘Don’t watch the news.’ Holding up an apologetic, *one-minute* finger, she disappears with the ID into a side room.

Wren leans against the counter and waits. It is the first day of her new job: probation and rehabilitation professional – not technically a probation officer, a distinction which has been made much of in the press. The project is a five-city programme, involving a total of 104 offenders being released between six and twenty-four months early. *Carefully screened offenders* – according to the CAP press release – *will make contact with those people most affected by his or her criminal actions, in order to understand and apologise for the repercussions of the crime*. Scrape away the jargon and the gilding and what’s left is an emergency valve to release the pressure on the UK’s critically overpopulated prisons. Let them out early, knock on some doors and make them say sorry nicely, hope for the best. Known briefly in the tabloid press as the ‘Lout’s Lottery’.

Known to people like Wren as ‘The Knocks’.

As a bona-fide former PO, Wren is overqualified, and it has been a battle to get Suzy on side. There were other, better-paid jobs out there for Wren that would have appeased some of her partner’s mostly valid concerns about belt tightening. And sure, the timing could be better, given that Suzy

is about to start maternity leave. But they'll manage. She's pretty sure they'll manage.

Music from a poorly tuned radio billows from the back room as the woman returns.

'You're still National Probation Service?'

'Yep.'

'But just more optimistic.' The woman tents her fingers under her chin, pleased with her joke.

Wren points and winks, knowing better than to bother challenging the cynicism. 'You got it.'

'Proper job.' She slides the ID and a plastic key card through on the tray. 'All the way to the back, double doors, and follow it to the right.'

Wren thanks her and turns away, but after a few steps the woman shouts after her.

'Do you think it'll work? I mean, really?'

'Got to be worth a try,' Wren calls back over her shoulder. It's something she's found herself saying a lot lately.

Breakfast is only just over but the place is already dense with the high-volume catering smells of £1.27-or-less lunches: onions, meat, potato reconstituted from pellets. She mouth-breathes until she exits the wide central thoroughfare and emerges into the Community Building.

The mechanism on the door receives her card, then gives her a green light. She steps inside. The room is overheated and smells of new paint. There are two access doors – the one for visitors, and another on the opposite wall which, when unlocked, opens into B-Wing. Three of the walls are regulation grey, the fourth matches the questionable exterior.

Wren almost smiles. Carpet. Heating. She can practically feel the prison's Victorian founders turning in their graves. Sipping her coffee, she goes to the window that looks out onto the rec yard.

It is a grand view. The facility sits at the crest of Horfield

looking north, away from the city, but the Community Building is afforded a broad, southerly sweep down to the best of Bristol, the postcard bits. Temple Meads; Suspension Bridge; St Mary Redcliffe; the blunt, unfinished-looking tower of the Wills Memorial. It strikes her that two hundred years ago when the first bricks of the prison were laid, most of that historic skyline hadn't even been built. All the same, someone along the line had made the decision to construct the place with its back to the city that had grown lawless enough to need it.

Or it could be that you're overthinking it, Wren tells herself. *Again.*

An office-supply clock on the wall informs her there are six minutes until the meeting. The prisoner will be on his way. She imagines him walking along the platform outside his cell, his shoes ringing out on the ironwork steps. Pausing every thirty feet for the warden to slide a new key in a new lock, and marvelling at his luck being chosen for the programme. Under the impression that release would be the end of all of it, of the shame and misery and boredom. The godawful food. Thinking that as long as he turns up to his appointments and keeps his curfews, everything he's done to get himself in there will be water under the bridge. And the people who have been felled and broken and twisted into tight, bloody shreds by the grief he's caused: all of those people might as well never have existed.

And maybe he'll be right about some of that. But not all of it.

Her phone buzzes as soon as she sets it on the table. Suzy. She lets her thumb hover over the green circle for just a moment before she makes the decision and cuts the call. Guilt needles her from a distance but evaporates a second later when she hears voices in the corridor. Something dark shifts in her chest and she clasps her hands together, turns

them inside out and pushes until her lats creak, reminding herself that the nerves are just because the project is new. New protocols, interest from the press, brass with a point to prove, more at stake than just letting them out and keeping them out of trouble.

A beep from the lock on the other side of the room, the prisoner's door. She squares her shoulders, straightens.

The door swings open.

'Miss Reynolds.' The warden is not one she knows. Tall, thin, borderline friendly.

Wren hasn't been *Miss* anything for a very long time but she doesn't correct him. She nods, and he steps aside.

And there he is.

Robert Malachy Ashworth, formerly of Isambard Court, Southmead. White, six-two. His hair is unchanged, cropped tight against his angular skull, but his narrow shoulders are rounded now, like he's holding something in his belly. She wonders, briefly, if it's remorse. She doubts it.

Wren puts out a hand. He looks at it for a moment before turning his bottle-brown eyes to hers. The slightest frown gathers on his forehead but she doesn't look away. The seconds are marked off by the ticking of the plastic clock. She takes in the threads of crimson in the whites of his eyes.

In a soft baritone the warden says, 'This lady's your probation officer, Ashworth.'

'Right.'

Ashworth breaks eye contact, and Wren silently lets out the breath she hadn't meant to hold.

'Shake the lady's hand, bud.'

Ashworth does as he is told, with the air of a man who does as he is told.

The skin of his palm is soft and warm against hers. An unpunished hand. Letting go, he passes his gaze down towards her throat, then straight to his shoes.

Wren gives a nod to the pallid warden. 'I can take it from here, thanks.'

'Buzzer's on the wall,' he says before he leaves. 'Hit it when you're finished.'

The door closes, and they are left alone.

Somewhere in the building there is a short klaxon. Wren sits down, and invites Ashworth to do the same. The chair spreads slightly under her weight, and she crosses her legs to avoid the press of the armrests on the outside of her thighs. She smoothes her skirt across her lap, then unpacks: files, a single pen, notebook.

She takes her time drinking the remaining inch of coffee, then slides the cup aside.

'So,' she says. 'You're getting out. Congratulations.'

'Yeah.' His voice is dry with disuse, and his face is set as hard as concrete. 'They said I've got to do visits?'

'That's right. I'm going to take you round to see some people, and we're going to have some conversations. The idea is that you find out what your actions have done, long term. Understand the wider repercussions.'

'What people, though?' Not a blink. Maybe not concrete after all, Wren thinks; maybe something older. Volcanic rock, perhaps.

'There's a list. Victims of the crime. Obviously in your case there's going to be... more to it.' She lets that sit for a moment, daring him to ask her why. Eventually she says, 'For you, it's your victim, and people connected to your accomplice.'

'Accomp— you mean Paige?'

She nods.

'And by *victim*, you're saying I've got to talk to Yardley.'

'Being the man you burgled and assaulted, yes,' she says. Settling into it now, hitting her stride. 'That qualifies him as the victim.'

Yardley, a former counsellor at Paige's school who'd also acted as a consultant to the care company responsible for her, had been the first to reply to Wren's letters. She'd expected the victim to be the most reluctant, especially in the circumstances, but she'd been wrong. *People change*, he'd told her later on the phone. *If I didn't believe that, I'd be in the wrong job.*

Ashworth sinks lower in his seat. 'What am I supposed to say to him?'

'*Sorry* is usually a good place to start. *Sorry I cracked your head against that wall. Sorry I stole that big shiny twenty-grand bracelet that hasn't been seen since.* That sort of thing.'

He says nothing to that.

'And then there is the small matter of his wife.'

A flinch, just a flick of the eyes.

'Do you know she's on four kinds of medication related to the trauma, Robert?'

'It's Rob.' He rubs his fingertips slowly across his eyebrows. 'And no. I did not know that.'

'Well, *Rob*, she is.' Wren flips open the file, making a point of finding the right page. 'First year after you broke into her home and tied her up, she lost her hair. Alopecia. Know about that?'

A shrug.

'Pretty much a recluse now. Can't work. Scared of everyone.'

He grunts, mutters something she doesn't catch.

'What was that?'

'I said, *I* didn't tie her up. Wasn't me.'

'Right.' Technically, it's true. 'I'm not alone in doubting that Paige would have thought of that herself though.'

Paige Garrett had still been a child. Fifteen, with a record that was not so much clean as immaculate. Non-existent. Which wouldn't have been so notable, but coupled with the fact that she'd spent the preceding nine and a half years in

state care, in some of the roughest boroughs in the West Country? It was more than a big deal. It was a miracle.

Wren pulls the sheet of standard conditions from its plastic wallet and reads them aloud: he will report to her on a twice-weekly basis; they will form a plan regarding his accommodation and return to work; the breaking of any licence condition could mean recall to prison. *You will, you will not. If you do x, then y.* The state's last attempt at drilling in the causal nature of crime and punishment. He nods at each clause, until she is done.

'And then there's the special conditions,' she says. 'For the programme.'

He looks up. Full attention.

She reads him the list of names, the people they will be meeting. The victims, obviously. Paige's friends. Teachers.

'Paige's teachers?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because in the absence of a family, we have to go a little further to find the people who loved her.'

'But I didn't do anything to her!'

'You did,' Wren says. Ashworth opens his mouth to complain but she holds up a finger. 'You *did*. And you don't get to control what we do here. Understood?'

He gives her a long, flat look. 'Fine.'

She continues the list of visits: Paige's friends, the children's home where she lived – which had also been the home of Ashworth's younger brother, Luke. With every name, his stare slides lower until he is directing the full beam of it into the table, as if he is trying to set the thing on fire.

'Did they find Paige?'

She looks up slowly from the sheet.

Ashworth was the last person to see her before she disappeared. The private CCTV from Yardley's house on the

night of the burglary showed her leaving, with him: her long blonde hair flashing white in the night-vision settings, her bare ankles glowing green under her skinny jeans and checked shirt. They went their separate ways. Ashworth was found a few hours later, and the bracelet he and Paige had stolen – solid platinum, set with almost a hundred diamonds and a single huge Colombian emerald at its heart – was already gone. Questions had been asked about their specificity, their *restraint* almost, in taking just the bracelet. There had been countless other things they could have stolen – paintings, antiques, huge quantities of jewellery dangling from mirrors and nestling in drawers. But one hot item was easier to offload than an armful, as Ashworth had put it, and so they'd made their choice. Upon arrest, Ashworth had initially claimed no knowledge of the theft, but then changed his story, saying he'd sold it and used the money to pay off a debt. But the bracelet isn't what interests Wren.

What bothers her is that Paige hasn't been seen since.

She watches for a flinch, a flick of the eyes. A tell. But nothing comes. 'Do *you* know where she is?'

'No.'

'No?'

'No.'

But she sees it, a glint of it escaping before he manages to get it locked down.

Fear.

But of what?

There are forms that need signing. When they're finished with the paperwork she rings the buzzer, and almost immediately footsteps sound in the corridor again. The heavy door swings open.

'All done?' the warden asks.

'For now.' She gestures to Ashworth that he can stand, that they're finished, but he doesn't move.

He nods, infinitesimally, at her folder. ‘What about Luke?’
‘Your brother?’

Another nod. ‘Haven’t seen him since I got here.’

Luke was the link between his older brother and Paige. He was just fourteen at the time, making him seventeen now. He’d been Paige’s friend. Questioned on three occasions by the police about her disappearance, but his alibi was tight. The transcripts read like a seance: lots of questions, very few answers.

‘He’s not on the list, no. But there’s no restriction on you getting in touch with him,’ she says, tidying her gear away. The warden ushers Ashworth towards the door.

‘Or my mum?’ Just for a few seconds, the muscled, crop-headed facade falls away and Robert Ashworth is a boy.

The file under her arm is slim, but it doesn’t hold everything she knows. It doesn’t say how it feels to have your mother institutionalised. It doesn’t say what a child like the one he’d been must sacrifice to survive in a world without a parent. She’d need a wheelie-bin to cart around *that* file, the one with all the humanity in it.

But that part isn’t her job. And even if it was, she’s not sure she’d do it for him, under the circumstances.

He glances up at her, granite-eyed and angry, and the boy is gone. ‘Did you track her down too?’

‘Your mum didn’t know Paige. So no, she’s not on the list.’ Wren doesn’t say that she tried – that Carrie Ashworth’s last known whereabouts, the studio flat a social worker had arranged for her when she was finally discharged to outpatient care, had apparently only been her home for a few weeks. After that, she’d packed up and left without leaving a forwarding address, and without, it seemed, dropping in on her first-born before she did so.

‘Luke might know where she is.’

‘Your mother?’

‘Paige.’ He keeps his eyes hard on Wren’s. ‘He might know where she went. But I sure as hell don’t.’

‘Ashworth,’ warns the screw. ‘Now.’

Ashworth waits, resisting the pull of the hand on his thick bicep.

‘We’ll see,’ Wren tells him, like it’s nothing much to her. ‘Plenty of time.’

Something like life flickers for a moment around his eyes, before he remembers where he is and crushes it. The warden jerks suddenly sideways as Ashworth releases his counter-balance and moves as bidden into the corridor. He gives Wren one last look before the door swings closed.