

**JOSEPHINE
TAYLOR**

EYE
of a
ROOK



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For Dad

Chapter 1

Perth, May 2009

It hurts.

It hurts like a toothache that pierces the bones of your face and shoots through your thoughts, scattering them like frightened birds.

What else? Alice opened herself to her body, registering the sensations she usually fled.

It hurts like an earache that squats in your skull and scrawls graffiti on its walls, trashing the house that was once your home.

She wished she had brought pen and paper. Yesterday's decision to write differently about the pain had brought a rush of words and images. She wanted to fix them in writing, shape them into some kind of new understanding.

Inside out. Lashed to a rack. Glistening innards and frayed nerves, ratcheted around my body. Prisoner. Torturer. Which am I? Where am I?

She pulled herself back from a brink, took deep, long breaths until her thumping heart slowed, shifted cautiously on the horseshoe cushion as scraggly wattle whipped past the window. Only ten minutes now. She must hold on.

How hard it was to describe the sensations to someone who'd never known such pain – pain without sense or logic, pain that ate away at all that was good in you, pain that might never go away. Especially there.

Alice wanted to speak the terrible words to Duncan. Press them upon him so that he too was scored by their jagged edges, make an offering of them so he could help her bear their weight. But she wasn't sure his idea of

sharing could stretch that far. *For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.* The words had come so easily then, the feelings too. But now? She looked at his hands on the steering wheel; there was no room for error. She took in his certain profile and knew it would not be softened – not today, anyway.

Perhaps it was enough that he was with her. Taking charge. Accelerating through amber lights, swinging the car round the bend, up the ramp and onto the freeway, and shooting that same, same question at her: ‘Tell me again why we’re doing this?’

Alice swallowed a sigh. ‘Because he seems to understand the pain – it feels like he can work with it.’ She chose her words carefully. Tried to speak calmly. ‘Some of the others in the support group have taken along their partners. It seems to help.’ She waited. But he was not going to make this easy for her. ‘It would be great if you could watch, cos I can’t see what’s happening. Then maybe we could try it the same way, at home.’

‘How do you feel when he’s working on you?’

Was she imagining the suggestion?

‘It’s scary ...’ Duncan stared doggedly at the road. Alice held her words until he glanced at her. Only a second, but it was enough. ‘And it’s weird. Feeling another guy’s hand, for a start. Then what he’s doing ...’

‘And how is it better than working with the female physio?’

That sharp clip to his voice. Maybe a casual approach would help, a conciliatory tone.

‘Mainly the way he uses breathing, I guess. It’s not better, just different. Contracting with the inhalation and releasing with the exhalation – you know. So I’m breathing out and he’s pushing and stretching at the same time and that, that ... barrier? I can feel it relaxing.’

Alice wished them away from this speeding car with its difficult thoughts, its tactical parleys. She wanted to place her husband’s arms around her, recreate the comfort and pleasure of the past within the circle of their bodies.

‘It almost sounds like you enjoy it.’ This time it was an accusation.

‘No – no, I don’t. But when he massages and stretches the muscles inside it feels better. Like when you have a headache and I give you a neck massage.’ How to both soothe and persuade? ‘It’s a relief because of the release, but it’s bloody painful.’

Alice knew she was telling half-truths. That hand hurt enough to make her cry, but it also coaxed moments that reminded her of what pleasure used to be, before this strange pain lodged in her undefended body.

She rested the side of her head against the window. The Swan was empty of boats today, the water dismal, the sky leaden. So different to that summer's day when they'd hired kayaks and paddled through a blue so dazzling it was hard to imagine it any other way.

'Fuck! Arsehole.' Duncan's gaze was trained on the tinny old Cortina blocking his way. 'Get in the left lane, idiot.' Duncan swerved to the left himself, accelerating past the car. The driver – a young bloke with messy hair – didn't notice her frowning husband. He was laughing with an invisible companion and gesticulating expansively, dangerously, in the air.

On the phone, she thought. Carefree.

Through the keening ache of her body, she reached out and touched Duncan's thigh, rested her hand there. 'Babe. What's going on?'

'Do you really want to talk about it?'

Was it a warning? 'Of course I do.' She silently urged him to look at her, to place his hand on hers in reassurance.

'I'm just really sick of this. And I'm wondering how much you want to get better.' His voice inflexible. 'Maybe that doctor was right.'

The shock jolted her hand back against her belly. She remembered coming home crying, repeating the gynaecologist's words to Duncan: *Do you think you might be dragging this on a bit?* She remembered Duncan cradling her. Seven months ago; what had changed?

She heard his voice, and there was something different now. 'If it keeps going on like this,' he said, 'I'm not sure if I can handle it. It's been a year and a half now. Unless you can try ...'

'But I *am* wanting to try. Why do you think I'm putting myself through these appointments?'

She heard his sigh. 'I don't know, Alice.'

'But I thought you believed me – that you understood. You've been okay with it all this time. You're pushing me now, when I'm almost ready!' Her throat clenched with the refusal to cry.

Silence formed a wall between them. Alice fixed her eyes on the arrow of the freeway. The burning had flared but they were almost there. Soon she would be able to stand and find some relief.

She wondered if asking him had been a mistake. Maybe she should continue the appointments alone. Permit this different man, this stranger, to enter her body. Encourage the sensations on the wavering border between pain and pleasure, build the trust that helped her open to him a little more each time, endure the stabbing and searing so she might 'get better'. So she might, one day, be able to reach for her husband again.

Was it too late to turn back?

Off the freeway and Duncan's lips pressed closed. He seemed uncertain of the way now. Would she wait for him to ask? Force him to need her?

She felt hollow with the concessions she'd already made, but it was her body, after all; her fault, if no-one else's. So she offered the words. 'Turn right, here.'

Duncan cornered hard.

Just the small street now. The white building. And soon, the white room. She pictured them, her husband and her physiotherapist, meeting over her body. Felt the impossibility of negotiating the demands of the two. Imagined closing the door on her awareness as she pulled down her skirt, then climbed onto the bench.

London, February 1866

Emily makes herself seemly.

Arthur imagines it thus, sitting in the adjoining room. But the particularities of her actions are obscure to him. Was his wife made to remove her crinoline for the examination? Her chemise? Is anyone there now to help her robe—to pull the laces of her stays tight, sculpting that biddable waist? He has not been privy to these intimate moments for some time, but still he remembers, and hopes.

Arthur pictures Emily. The milky skin where the sun has not touched; the smooth slope of her buttocks, which has been solely his province. He sees the grey-blue of her eyes. Strokes the side of her face, with its sprinkle of light freckles. Scoops up her hair, red-gold and silky in his hands.

He wishes he could be with her so she is not left undone, shamed by all she has endured.

Instead, here he is, listening to the surgeon scratching notes at his stately desk, trying to fool himself that he is in a drawing room—because, look at the ornaments cluttering the mantel; and there, the heavy sofas illuminated in the light sidling past velvet curtains. But the certificates above an elaborately carved cabinet remind him otherwise. Arthur peers through the hazy air. "President of the Medical Society of London 1865", announces one. Another gilt-edged document proclaims an opening: "The London Surgical Home for the Reception of Gentlewomen and Females of Respectability suffering from Curable Surgical Diseases". He can just make out the year: 1858. How many gentlewomen have been brought here in the intervening years? Have their husbands or their fathers sat

in this same overstuffed chair? Were their thoughts as his: addled with concern and suspicion; terrified of consequences this man might not disclose? Though spare of figure, Mr Isaac Baker Brown has the look of a large horse harnessed to a plough. Is he as solid and unstoppable?

“Now, Mr Rochdale.” The surgeon leans back in his leather chair. “Before I give you my diagnosis, I require some facts from you about your wife. Is she restless—perhaps, excitable? Or is she of a melancholic disposition? Even ... shall we say ... withdrawn from you?”

What can he say, when the questions are so weighted with authority?

“She manifests these qualities in turn.” It seems disloyal to talk about Emily in this way to a stranger, but even as he speaks, Arthur feels the burden of his wife’s peculiar malady shifting. “Sometimes she has such nervous excitability she is unable to sleep and paces restlessly by day. But then she is prostrated by nervous exhaustion and weeps and sighs ceaselessly.”

The steel nib of Baker Brown’s pen scrapes at paper. Arthur imagines other instruments this hand must hold: a caustic compound, surgical scissors—

His mind shies away.

“Does she complain of various affections?” The man’s question returns him.

“She is always ailing but has become silent in my presence, where before she confided eagerly.” He should have removed his frockcoat; the tweed is heavy in this close room. “Recently she has become indifferent to the functioning of the home and fanciful in her food.”

“Does she speak of pain in the head or down the spine?”

Baker Brown is, it seems, working his way methodically through a list. Arthur wriggles ineffectually against the stuffing of his seat.

“We have purchased a spinal couch that she might rest comfortably, as she has always pain in the lower back.”

The surgeon frowns. “It is in these cases of spinal irritation that we observe functional derangements. These are very likely to pass into actual organic diseases.”

Arthur’s belly twists.

“Does she have distaste for the closeness incident upon marriage?” The question more direct this time.

“At first our relations were ...” Arthur’s lips close on this intimacy. He has to force them open. “Relations were natural and pleasurable for us both. But then she began to complain of a burning and stabbing in her

private parts, such that she must pass her water every half-hour—this for nigh on a year now.” He is dismayed at the tremor in his own voice; newly perturbed at the disordered woman revealed by his account. “She has pain on visiting the water closet, pain with our congress, pain when walking. It seems her life has been reduced to suffering.”

Baker Brown’s full mouth purses and releases as he writes. Arthur looks into the small fire crackling in the grate, its smoke the memory of roasting chestnuts, its gentle staccato a childhood lullaby. He remembers the voice of his wife as it was when they first met: eager, musical—the cadences weaving around him, as his evening brandy clings to its snifter when swirled. And he remembers her lovely intimate voice, lost nine months into their marriage. She still spoke, but in a faltering tone. He no longer heard her cries of pleasure, twined with his, only this new, bewildered voice in the night; nor could he speak in return, when compassion, embarrassment, helplessness, rose up and stopped his throat.

Baker Brown sets down his pen. “When I examined your wife,” he says, steeping his hands, “she admitted to frequent periods attended with pain. There are further indications of nervous disturbance: her eyelids quiver and her gaze will not easily meet my own. Upon a personal examination I also noted peculiarities typical in such cases ...” He hesitates for a moment. “A certain coarseness ...”

A certain coarseness? To what is the man referring, when Emily’s skin is so soft, her nature so sweet?

Baker Brown releases his fob from its pocket, fingering it deftly. “In conclusion,” the man pronounces, “there is evidence of persistent excitation of the pudic nerve. Nerve power has been exhausted through overstimulation. Your wife”—he falters—“your wife herself ...” He looks at Arthur suggestively. “Do you understand my meaning?”

Arthur does not wish to understand. To what strange desires and unnatural behaviours has his Emily been made to confess? Arthur would like to strike this interloper. Rescue his wife and never return. He has to remind himself of her unaccountable suffering and the surgeon’s reputed skill.

“We are both learned men, Mr Rochdale.” The voice smooth and assured now. “Hysteria is established in your wife and maintained by this continual irritation. The operation I am suggesting destroys the nerve, excising the cause of excitement, so that hysteria is halted before it progresses to epilepsy and idiocy. Even death.”

A sharp tremor seizes Arthur's body. *Death*, the man said, his face implacable. And those other words, like an assault: *epilepsy*, *idiocy*. Arthur sees his wife pulling herself close and quietly retreating to the spinal couch in her bedchamber. He hears her small voice, diminishing further as she withdraws from her family, her friends, and then, finally, from him.

She could not have brought this on herself, surely? This sick and troubled woman who is his wife?

"Judicious aftertreatment is critical to the success of the operation." Arthur marks the surgeon's words now, and feels their terrible gravity. "The continuous observation and moral influence of the nurses helps to prevent further ... shall we say ... unnatural practices."

Unnatural practices. Is this possible? How has he not noticed? Arthur feels admonished along with his wife. But he also has the impulse to take up a pistol and defend her honour; the urge to clasp hands in solidarity with the surgeon and castigate her wantonness. The elements are capricious and he a weathervane.

"I should warn you that aftertreatment requires perseverance. Not only on your part, but on the part of your family and friends. However"—Baker Brown's mouth curves into a shape resembling a smile—"your wife is anxious to be cured, which is a favourable sign. I would advise her prompt admission to the Surgical Home. Here, I will note the address." He scribbles, then holds out the note. "And a date: two weeks hence."

The details sprawl confidently across the page. February 26th: so close, so utterly ... chilling. Arthur imagines Emily lying unrobed in a narrow bed at this "Home", her eyes wells of despair and accusation.

"The operation is radical. I am concerned that my wife's pain might have another cause—that we may unnecessarily expose her to increased suffering." A surge of protective unease gives Arthur the courage to challenge this unsettling man; to speak for Emily, who seems no longer able to speak for herself. "Might not this operation take from my wife the seat of her womanhood?"

"No, no. Nothing of the sort. Rather than interfere with marital happiness it may enable procreation. Surely that is what you wish?"

"Yes, of course, but it seems somehow ... immoral, to be acting so."

The man's smile is conspiratorial, unnerving. "It is our moral duty," he says, "to protect the weaker sex from indulgence in unnatural venereal pleasure. We must consider the facts."

Arthur hesitates. "Perhaps," he says faintly.

“Many of my former patients go on to bear numerous children. They become in every respect good wives.”

Children. They had wanted children, he remembers. In their marriage bed, in the dark—where they’d discovered each other’s bodies and shared their most precious dreams; when it seemed that everyone else in the world must be asleep—they’d whispered their imaginings. Would their children have Arthur’s glossy brown hair? Emily’s broad brow? What little ones might chase each other through the delphinium bed at Hierde House and pluck the peaches from their espaliered wall? Longing is a pang in Arthur’s chest.

What if Baker Brown is simply trying to help?

“Your wife has asked for assistance. We need to make the right decision.”

How can Arthur be sure? He feels the heaviness of Emily’s life in his hands. Sees again her journal page, glimpsed before she snapped close the cover. *It is like a brand searing my flesh, inside and out. How can I continue?* The naked plea: *Oh God, please help me!*

How can he hesitate?

Sudden sunlight shafts the room, catching Arthur in its glowing bar. He feels transparent: as if Baker Brown can see, through his translucent skin, his confusion, his reluctance—his antipathy.

“Yes,” says Arthur, the word anchoring his sliding world. “Yes.”