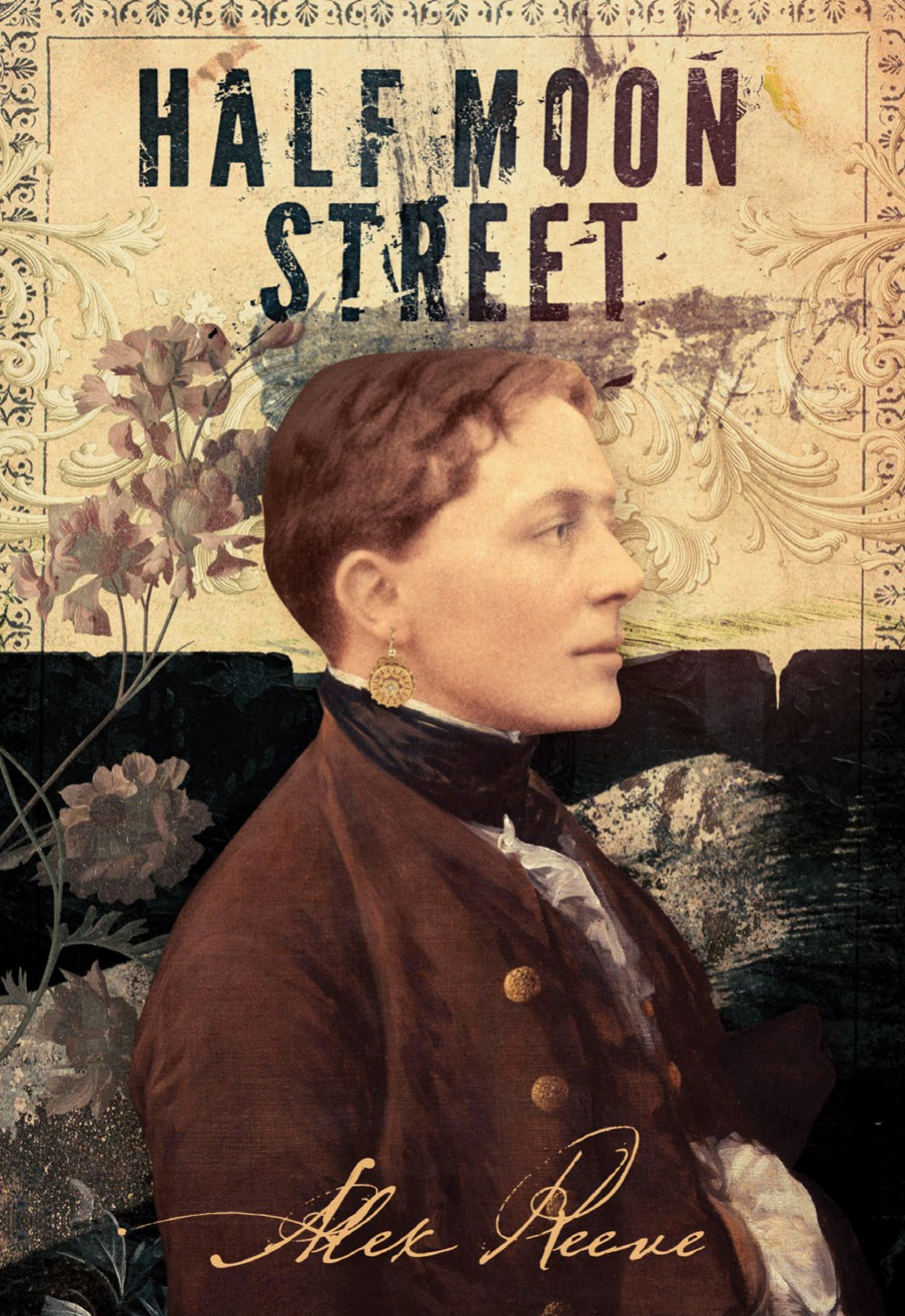
HALF MOON STREET



Alex Reeve

Mr Hurst washed the blood from his hands in the sink, and dried them, leaving pink smears on the towel.

It was a bone-cold January day and I had nowhere soft to get any warmth. The examination room was in the bowels of the hospital and tiled on all four walls, the only natural light coming from high, frosted windows level with the pavement outside. Mr Hurst didn't notice the chill, having greater mass than me and doubtless retaining heat, much like a chimneybreast, and being further warmed by the inner glow of his renown. He was the best surgeon in his field, acknowledged by everyone whose opinion counted, although his patients were less likely to complain than most, being already dead. His specialism was the washed-up, pushed-off, dug-up and poisoned of London, all the poor wretches whose cause of death was considered suspicious. He cut them open and studied their innards, and I sewed them up as good as new, more or less, and wrote down his findings for the police.

'Drowned. River water in the lungs. Bloated. No signs of a struggle. No bruising, stabbing or ligatures. This wasn't foul play. Do you have all that?' I nodded, shivering, huddled down in my chair by the foldaway desk. 'No doubt he was drunken and fell

off a bridge. One less fool in the world.' He checked his pocket watch. 'Finish up, will you? I have a dinner.' He pulled on his coat, and was gone.

The dead fellow's name was Jack Flowers, formerly of Ludgate Hill, only twenty-six years old—my age or thereabouts. He'd been married six years. For a second I felt a pang of jealousy.

He was naked now, but had been found fully clothed floating off the quay at Limehouse with a bottle of Barclay's light ale in his jacket pocket, still stoppered. His wallet was saturated. I counted five pennies and a farthing, making the bargee who hauled him out unusually honest. There was a postcard as well, faded and damply translucent. No handwriting, but I could make out the picture of a beach and two ladies paddling under an ornate pier, with the words 'Southend-on-Sea' printed above. Poor bastard, dreaming of a day out in the sunshine, and ending up on a metal slab with his chest unfolding like the last bloom before autumn.

I wondered if he'd known what was happening in those final moments: the stink of the silt in his nostrils, the slap of the Thames chop against his face, the soot-black wharfs and distant people, out of reach, out of earshot, his arms growing weak as the cold embraced him.

'I hope you *were* bloody drunk,' I said.

My voice echoed off the walls and my breath fogged. Jack Flowers had no breath. Mr Hurst had taken out his lungs and weighed them—thirty ounces for the right and twenty-six for the left—and then stuffed them back into his corpse.

He reminded me of a bear, this Jack Flowers. He had sturdy knees, thick arms and curly black hair on his head that extended unbroken from his face down to his chest, gathering densely around his cock and swarming over his legs and feet. Even his toes sprouted little outcrops of hair.

I wrote down 'Male' on my folio.

I washed the retractor in the sink and hung it on the wall. I'd labelled each hook so everything had its place: callipers, bone saws, ruler, trocar, scissors, pliers, a row of scalpels of all different sizes. The water was freezing and my hands were puffy and sore

as I dried them. I wished I had some gloves and a thicker waistcoat and a scarf I could wrap around my neck and tie a knot in.

I put his wallet and keys on one side to give to the widow. Everything else I piled in the basket to be burned or given to the poor, all except that bottle of ale, which one of the porters would probably have, not minding it had been in the pocket of a dead man bobbing around in the Thames. I rinsed it off in the sink, and noticed something written on the label. I squinted closer, and could make out a single word: *MERCY*. It seemed like an odd thing to write. The bottle was still full, so perhaps it was a plea to the demon drink, a final attempt at abstinence, or maybe an offering to God, a prayer for forgiveness. Either way, it hadn't been answered.

'Almost over now, Jack.'

The needle pushed easily through the pelt of his chest as I made the first stitch.

When I was finished I wheeled him back to the mortuary and went to find Pallett, the lad the police had sent for their copy of the report. In the early evening, the hospital was subdued. This was my favourite time, when most of the doctors and surgeons had gone home and the nurses could relax, with no one barking at them to fetch more splints or shine a light just there, no, not there, *there*.

I could hear voices from the men's ward, a low babble broken by an occasional whoop when three of a kind beat two pairs. They were waiting for their supper. Later on, when they'd had their fill, they would get livelier. Disagreements could turn nasty. It wasn't unknown for someone to die of something other than what they came in with, and end up in one of my reports.

I found Pallett at the nurses' station, which was a desk, a blackboard and a collection of cupboards behind the main entrance. Nurse Coften looked up and smiled. She had a calm gentility, as if she was a lost duchess from some faraway land.

'Is it him you want?' She pointed with her pen at Pallett, who was slouching against the wall looking uncomfortable. 'He's been mooning about waiting for Cecilia, Nurse Rasmussen that is.'

Pallett went red, right to his ears. 'I'm not,' he said. 'I have to wait somewhere, don't I?'

'He's got a uniform now,' she continued, angling her pen up and down to sum it up. 'He thinks she'll be impressed.'

It was new to him, but not new. His helmet perched atop his head like a cherry on a cake, and that jacket had been worn by a good many men. It was too small for his substantial frame, with mismatched buttons and a stain that might have been blood. But still, it marked his ascension from trainee to the ranks of Her Majesty's Constabulary at the third attempt, a day I'd begun to doubt would ever arrive. He was an honest lad but no prodigy. They didn't send their best men to fetch reports on drowned drunks from the likes of me.

I read it to him, which took all of one minute.

'The family's in the chapel.' Nurse Coften pointed with her pen again, studying us over the bridge of her spectacles. 'The widow will be wanting to know.'

'Isn't it the hospital's job to tell her?' Pallett protested. 'This wasn't a crime.'

'No. He was examined at the request of the coroner. He's your responsibility, not ours. What would Miss Rasmussen think?'

He wilted. 'But I don't know what to say.'

'Say it was an accident. Say he fell in the river and there was no crime. He wasn't clubbed on the head or robbed. That's what they'll want to know.'

'And give them these,' I said. 'Keys and wallet. And tell them he didn't suffer any pain.'

'Is that true?'

'Probably not, but they'll be comforted.'

He nodded and stroked his moustache. For all his size it was a feeble wisp of a thing. I could have done better myself. 'Drowned, not clubbed on the head, no crime, no pain.'

'That's it. Good man.'

He still didn't move. Nurse Coften and I exchanged a glance. 'I have paperwork,' she said.

I sighed and turned to Pallett. 'All right, I'll come with you, *Constable*, but you're doing all the talking. And take off that bloody helmet, for goodness' sake.'

Pallett did so, clutching it to his chest. 'Much obliged, Mr Stanhope,' he said. 'You're a proper gentleman.'

The chapel was at the back of the hospital, a white-walled room with a painted cross and pews that were creaky and prone to collapse, cast-offs from the Abbey across the road. A little boy was hurtling around, chased by his sister, and a younger lad was asleep, despite the din, curled up next to his mother. She was about my age, plump around the perimeter, wearing a shawl, spectacles and an expression of despair as she watched her offspring. She stood up as we arrived but still only reached my shoulder. We introduced ourselves and she thanked us for taking the trouble.

'He drowned,' Pallett announced. 'It was an accident. He wasn't clubbed on the head or nothing.'

She closed her eyes, and I could see she had a bruise on her cheekbone. 'So you're saying he just *fell in*?'

'Exactly,' said Pallett. 'He had these on him when they fished him out.'

He handed her the keys and wallet. She didn't even look at them. 'What about his satchel? He always had his satchel. Took it with him every day.'

'I'm sorry, no,' I said. 'It most probably sank.'

She nodded, watching her children racing between the pews. 'So that's it, is it? Nothing more to be done?'

'Were you expecting something else?'

She smiled thinly. 'He knew some bad people, that's all.'

'I assure you Mr Hurst found no sign of foul play. I wrote the report myself.'

'Then it must be true, mustn't it?'

I was a little shocked by her attitude. Relatives of the deceased normally just nodded mutely and escaped as quickly as they could. One or two had even called me *sir*, though I doubted that was part of Mrs Flowers's vocabulary.

'It was a tragic accident,' Pallett added, and for a moment I thought he'd exhausted his reserves of cheer, but then he remembered. 'He didn't suffer any pain, neither.'

She took a deep breath, and picked up her smallest child, still fast asleep. 'Jack was a lovely lad when I first met him, always joking, making me laugh. He worked at Smithfield's and I was in my father's butcher's, so I saw plenty of him. In the summer we used to go over to Hackney with his brothers, and they'd go swimming in the ponds.'

'That sounds very pleasant,' I said, hoping it wouldn't continue for long. I was already thinking about the evening to come, and was too excited to be patient.

'It was. All afternoon, hours at a time.' She looked at me sharply. 'That's the thing. He could swim like a fish, could Jack.'

At the end of my shift, I left by the staff door on Princes Street, gathering my coat around me. When I had first started at Westminster Hospital I always used the main entrance, gazing in awe at the Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, feeling special to be standing in such a spot. But the route was longer and the pavement busier, and I soon fell out of the habit.

Even the stench was stifled by the cold. It wasn't far, a mile at most, and I almost ran, keen to get home and get ready, rehearsing in my head how the evening would unfold. I weaved through the crowds in Trafalgar Square, past poor Admiral Lord Nelson, stuck forever on his column without even a stony-faced Lady Hamilton for company, and up Haymarket, dodging between the carriages at Charles Street, whose houses were glorious, with shiny black doors, pale stone pillars and hanging baskets of ivy.

Above Coventry Street, the townhouses decayed into crooked tenements abutting the pavement, with bars over the windows and heavy locks on the doors. Some workmen were tearing down a building to widen the road, sledge-hammering the walls and blowing great clouds of dust into the air. They were shirtless despite the weather, their britches held up by braces over their bare shoulders or pieces of rope tied around their waists. I had

never taken off my shirt in public even as a child. My mother had suggested it once when we were playing in the garden on a hot and humid day, but my father put a stop to it. One of his parishioners might turn up and then what would they think? The Reverend Ivor Pritchard believed we should cover our nakedness. It was one of the few things we agreed on.

My room was above a careworn pharmacy on Little Pulteney Street in Soho, an area that almost succeeded in not being a slum. It was run by Alfie Smith, an ex-army man and widower, and his daughter of eleven, Constance, a sharp-eyed little thing, all skin and bone and too clever by half.

The shop was empty but for Constance, spinning on her stool, pushing off the counter with her hands and then brushing the dusty carboys of coloured water with her feet, leaving glossy trails on the glass. As soon as she saw me she leapt up, staggered dizzily and shouted: 'Powdered Coleoptera beetles!'

'Powdered what?'

'Coleoptera beetles. What's your guess, Mr Stanhope?'

'I don't know. Let me think.' I scanned the shelves. They were crammed floor to ceiling with pots and potions, but there was nothing to give me a hint. 'Heart palpitations?'

'Wrong.' She bounced up and down on her toes, grinning impishly. 'Do you surrender?'

'No, I still have two more guesses.' I narrowed my eyes at her, but she was unmoved. 'Could it be skin rash? No, no, that doesn't count. It wasn't a proper guess.'

'Yes it was. One left.'

'One? You're an inconsiderate girl. Some people have more respect for their elders. Some people are generous and give clues.'

'Stupid people, not me. One left.'

'All right. Is it ulcers?'

'No!' She clapped her hands together. 'It's blisters! It cures blisters. I win again. That's eight for me, five for you.'

'Don't gloat too soon,' I said, but without much conviction.

By my reckoning I would very soon owe her a cream pastry of her choice from the French tea shop on Regent's Street. I had

won the first four straight while she was working from her own knowledge, especially as she leaned towards the morbid and infamous, like phosphorus, which cures bellyaches but also destroys the bones, and arsenic, which aids sufferers with malaria but is also a deadly poison. The pharmacy stocked both and I guessed them easily, but then she started consulting her father's pharmaceutical books for obscure remedies and soon overtook me. Powdered beetles? Good grief.

I climbed the stairs, thinking I would have to go to the laundry on Saturday morning. If I'd won she would've had to wash all my shirts, which seemed a decent wager when I made it.

My little room overlooked the yard. I had a chair by the window so I could read in the light, a wooden bed with a sunken mattress, a chest of drawers supporting an almost-complete Staunton chess set (the white queen having long since been deposed by her jealous subjects and replaced by a wine cork in a satirical act of rebellion) and a too-large mahogany wardrobe that had been adored by Alfie's late wife but he couldn't bear to look at any more.

I hung up my jacket and bowler hat, and tossed my shirt in the bottom of the wardrobe. This was the part of my day I hated most: peeling off the two yards of bandage that was wrapped around my chest. The material was spotted with old bloodstains where it had rubbed against the skin under my arms. Every day I tried to find a clean part of the fabric, and every day two new stains formed. My cilice, I called it, after the horsehair shirts monks wore as a penance for their sins, although it seemed to me I wasn't the sinner but the victim of God's cruel trick, and He should wear the dratted thing instead of me.

That man today, the corpse, Jack Flowers, probably woke up yesterday morning, got dressed and went out to work, or to look for work, and in the evening drank himself into a stupor, never once having to consider his body; its hair, its skin, the size of its nose and the thickness of its fingers. He had no idea how fortunate he was. No such luxury for me. I had to think about my body all the time.

I dabbed myself with balm and winced at the sting of it, and then lay back on my bed, savouring the coolness. The gooseflesh was worth it.

After ten minutes of bliss, I dug out another cilice from the drawer and bound myself up, flattening my breasts from their God-given shape. Wearing only my underclothes, I was boyishly spare, lacking any noticeable contours. When I closed my eyes I could sense the way I should have been: the breadth of my shoulders, the length of my feet, the heft of my thighs, the weight of the *thing* hanging down between my legs. But when I opened them again I was still the same, a child's stick-drawing of a man, absent shape, absent strength, absent the very parts of a man that make him a man.

I pulled on my trousers, settling the roll of cloth I'd sewn into the crotch into place. I'd grown used to it there, the bulge as I sat down, the pressure of it against my thigh. In my early days I hadn't known how to position it, having almost no experience of the male physique. I'd seen my older brother Oliver naked just once as a boy, bursting in on him in the bath, standing in the doorway transfixed by the little fish swimming between his legs. I knew they got bigger as boys became men, but I didn't know how big, so I experimented with the length and breadth of the roll of cloth, resulting in some strange looks from passers-by and one offer of temporary employment from an unsavoury photographer.

I would wear a clean shirt tonight, pure white cotton, discovered by lucky chance the previous summer in a shop on Carnaby Street. On the most important night of my life I'd be wearing a shirt with the legend 'J. Kingsmill, Fourth Form' sewn into the collar.

Having rushed home, I now realised I was early. There was nothing to do but wait. I perused my little shelf of books, Dickens and Meredith mainly, but also Thackeray, Trollope and Butler, settling for my most comforting, my most familiar, a stiff, stained copy of *Barnaby Rudge*, situated at the end, easiest to hand.

Books were my education. At eleven years of age my father had looked me up and down, his gaze pausing disapprovingly on

my small yet ineluctable chest, and declared that my studies were over. I was top of my class, even called upon to instruct the others when the teacher was away, yet I was evicted, forced to rely on the library we had at home, snatching time between learning to play the cacophonous violin and condemning seedlings to death in the flower beds. My father read widely and quickly on a range of topics, Hardy, Homer, Browning and Carlyle, Darwin and John Stuart Mill, as well as books on anatomy and ornithology—his other principal passion besides dogs and God, in that order—so I could tell a sparrow from a wren by the age of eight, but never mastered my mother's delights of music, planting and pruning. That I took so much after him was a source of sadness for her and bewilderment for me, but I don't think he noticed at all.

Finally, the hour struck seven, and it was time to leave the house. As I was opening the back door I heard Constance call out: 'Are you going to learn some more remedies, Mr Stanhope?'

'No, Miss Smith. I'm going to play chess. A game I can win at.'

But that was a lie. I did go west towards my chess club, hunched against the cold and spitting rain, but I carried on walking, just like every Wednesday, onwards into the tangled mews above Piccadilly.

The pavement was empty and the lamps were broken again. A dog overtook me on my way, trotting with an easy, muscular gait, tongue lolling. On his hind legs he would have been as tall as me. He seemed to know where he was going, and I followed him into the gloom, unable to keep myself from smiling. At that moment everything seemed possible. If I just keep putting one foot in front of the other, I thought, I will reach my heart's desire.

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Elizabeth Brafton's brothel was on Half Moon Street, which ran between the lofty affluence of Mayfair and the ceaseless noise and bustle of Piccadilly. The house was set back from the pavement behind an iron railing, squashed between grander buildings like a thin book on a shelf of fatter volumes. It didn't advertise itself.

I had tried more commonplace dolly-houses before finding Mrs Brafton's, and they were uniformly appalling. The girls did what they were paid to do, but they didn't understand. Most attempted to treat me as a woman or just lay there in dumb confusion. One or two made an effort, working doggedly through their repertoire and crying out with pleasure rather as a news-seller cries out the title of his paper, with worthy intention but so much repetition it loses all meaning.

It was my friend Jacob from the chess club, a wise old Jew with special tastes of his own and a wasteful way with pawns, who suggested I should try Mrs Brafton's. Since then I'd been coming every week for nearly two years. Weekly was all I could afford, but if I'd been richer, if I'd had all the money in the world, I would've come here every day, every hour, just to be with my Maria.

Mrs Brafton was in the drawing room, richly dressed, one arm resting on the mantelpiece. She was a widow, perhaps forty-five years old, upright and unyielding, with russet hair pulled into a schoolmistress bun to hide her wisps of grey. Outside of this place you'd never guess what she was. She treated the girls like her children and liked to pretend that her customers were friends, come round to pay a visit. We all played along.

'Good evening, Mr Stanhope,' she said. 'How are you? Very well, I trust?' Her voice was melodic and refined. Sometime in her past, long before she became what she was now, she'd received an education.

'Yes, thank you.'

The Colonel was slumped and shrunken in a chair, little more than a pile of clothes and a bald pate, as smooth and pink as the meat of an uncooked fish. I doubted he'd ever been a real colonel, but she always called him that. He was the only customer she ever personally entertained, out of habit or pity. The girls, chattering starlings that they were, told me he was too old to perform these days and paid for nothing more than her womanly company. They said you could hear her knitting needles click-clacking through the bedroom door.

'Miss Milanes is waiting for you in the first-floor room,' she said, and smiled. She had a girlish mouth and a banker's eyes. I dropped two half-crowns into the willow-pattern bowl on the dresser.

On the stairs, little Audrey winked as she passed me with a customer in tow. He was out of breath, paunchy and reeking of sweat. His wife probably doted on him, this dank-browed shopkeeper in worn-out shoes, but she wouldn't do for him what Audrey would do. I'd been with Audrey once, on an early visit before Maria. The walls of her room were mounted with manacles, and there were ropes and buckles and canes with wickerwork handles on the shelves. Lithe and tiny as she was, she would cheerfully beat you raw for a florin, and for six shillings you could beat her in return. But that wasn't my preference. I was a traditionalist.

And I was in love. Today was the day I would prove it.

There were faint sounds from the other rooms: footsteps and low voices, a woman's laugh rippling into a lascivious giggle. I paused at Maria's door. I would soon be in her arms, and wanted to savour these final seconds. I had waited all week. *Maria Milanes*. Just the sight of her name in my diary was enough to make my stomach lurch, and the taste of it in my mouth was like plums in honey: *Maria Milanes*.

Her grandmother had been Italian, she'd once told me, and had pronounced their surname in three syllables, the last rhyming with 'tease'. But her late mother had thought this too foreign and reduced the syllables to two, the last rhyming with 'drains' or (and Maria hesitated at the word, as if I might not know the meaning of it) 'mundanes'. When I laughed and told her that 'mundane' has no plural, she pouted and turned away, only relenting when I insisted, nuzzling at the nape of her neck, that she could never be mundane, and was quite the most singular person I had ever met.

I knocked on her door, wondering if knocking was the wrong thing to do, or if my rat-a-tat-tat was too frivolous, too silly. It didn't matter. She opened the door and threw her arms around my neck.

'Leo,' she breathed into my ear. 'I love you, my Leo.' And then she kissed me.

PURCHASE BOOK