

## CHAPTER ONE

With growing unease, Elaine put the telephone receiver back in its cradle. Opening the front door, she stepped outside into the porch, absorbing the wail of sirens that passes for birdsong in a London suburb. It had only been a small white lie: something to put her husband's mind at rest.

"How's Judy?"

"Oh, you know. Buried in her homework."

Their daughter *had* been doing her homework - would have finished it by now - but for the small matter of the postage stamps. And stamps were one of the few things Elaine hated to run out of.

"Why don't you eat?" Graham had suggested. "I'm going to be stuck in this meeting for another hour."

She tried to put a smile in her voice. "Well, if you don't mind. Perhaps we will."

Judy should have been gone for ten minutes at the most instead of - what? A glance at her watch suggested - *surely it couldn't be ten to six?* She *knew* what time dinner would be on the table. What could be keeping the girl? The violet dusk had deepened to coal; the streetlights were encased in orange halos. Arms folded, Elaine walked to the end of the garden path, scanning the stretch of Strathdale Road. Judy wasn't allowed to use the alley after dark, not alone. Long and narrow, it was enclosed by high windowless walls on one side and playing fields on the other, the middle stretch unlit. Elaine's feet made the decision for her. They walked back into the house, infused with thyme from the Shepherd's Pie, stepped into her shoes. It only remained for her to grab her keys. She would meet her daughter coming in the opposite direction. Hurry her along.

Approaching the end of her road, Elaine tensed at the sound of raised voices in the near distance, the odd order shouted loud above the general background roar. "Come on! Over here!" *Must be the school football team practising in the playing fields*, she thought. *Keen, at this time of the evening*. The sound of crowds, even spectators like these, always made her slightly edgy.

Leaving the streetlight behind Elaine entered the alley, picking up her pace, imagining that when her feet slid it was leaf mulch rather than dog shit she was treading in. The shouts escalated: if this was football, it was no friendly match. Tension mutated to anxiety. Last summer the Brixton Riots had spilled onto nearby streets after the police had approached the Stop and Search campaign with hunger for overtime. And they'd got it: 5,000 rioters, buildings torched, looting, petrol bombs. Prior to that she had always considered that the perimeter of her home territory was encircled by a shimmering Ready Brek force-field. Perhaps it had been irresponsible to send a thirteen-year-old on an errand just as it was growing dark. But she and Graham had agreed: a gradual loosening of the reins; a little more responsibility; and then the rewards.

Through filtered streetlight, Elaine saw that her exit was blocked by haphazardly abandoned vehicles, more of a hindrance than the flimsy strip of plastic that hung limply across the alley.

"Excuse me!" she called out to a man who entered her narrow view, and whose fluorescent jacket hinted at officialdom.

Quick to confirm her assessment, his hand jerked into a stop sign. "Do you live here?"

"No, but..." Elaine strained to look past him, between the vehicles, their headlights employed as searchlights. Columns of grey swirls were highlighted, just as sunbeams highlight golden dust motes.

"Then you can't come through, Madam. The wall's come down." The man lifted an erect index finger as his walkie-talkie crackled, inclining his head. "*Yup. Gotcha. Afraid I'm wanted.*"

"Just a minute!" Elaine was on tiptoes. "I'm looking for my daughter. Which way would you have sent

her if she wanted to come this way?"

She detected his slight hesitation. "Took this route, did she?"

"An hour ago. Mind you, if she's had to go via the Broadway -"

"How old is she?" As he looked at her face properly for the first time, Elaine saw that she was no longer an inconvenience.

It was her turn to pause, her response liting questioningly. "Thirteen."

"School uniform?"

Too late: Elaine had seen his wince. "Yes."

"Back in a jiffy. Don't go anywhere." Pacing backwards, the man pointed at her before pivoting, feet tripping into a jog.

Through a veil that had the appearance of slow-moving smoke - like the Great Smog of 1952, one of her earliest memories, turning London winter into toxic night - Elaine began to make out the jagged dip of the missing section of wall. Strewn below, a pile of rubble that appeared greater in volume than the gap, wide as it was. Shadowy movement was captured in the headlights: silhouettes of human conveyor belts. She ducked beneath the inadequate cordon, brushing it from her clothing where it had clung like cobweb.

Edging between two vehicles, Elaine moved towards the source of the shouting. Solemn-faced men were captured in cross-beams: some equipped with hard hats, face-masks and boots; others dressed in shirt-sleeves and suit trousers. Some were digging bare-handed, others improvising with gardening gloves or whatever protection had come to hand. Brick by brick, debris was being quarried, new piles constructed, the effort furious and loud.

People had spilled out of terraced houses, the backdrop to the bus stop; some simply watching, their faces set in Plaster of Paris. Men removed debris from gardens, waiting to take their shift at the pit face. Waist-height children ignored limp encouragement to 'go and finish your dinner.' One woman was conducting figure-of-eight sorties, distributing mugs of tea, steam merging with dust, becoming part of the grey soup. At the end of the road blue lights rotated mutely. In the gaps between vehicles, faces flashed: ghostly, expectant. That was where Judy would be: avoiding the long walk home.

"Excuse me, coming through." Elaine felt anonymous, another shadow whose presence would go unchallenged provided she looked sufficiently purposeful.

*"There! That was where she was!"*

Spinning to locate the speaker, she zoned in on the half-lit face of a wretched boy with a crude gash on his forehead. He pointed towards the rubble, his hand breaching the beam of a headlight.

"Alright, son. Let him through. Everyone else: stay well back!" A policeman clapped one hand on the boy's shoulder, guiding him forwards. "There, you say?"

Acting with an intuition of their own, Elaine's feet followed before the gap had the chance to heal. They deposited her on a square foot of tarmac where she could eavesdrop.

"She was in the phone box. Like an idiot, I told her to get out. She'd have been better off staying put."

This was someone's daughter they were talking about.

"Now, we don't know that, son."

Shaken by the ferocity of her breathing, Elaine pondered a possibility: somewhere, under the weight of the rubble...

"It would have shielded her. Even though it's gone over on its side, they're strong, those things. I mean, shit!" As a torch flashed, she feasted on the features of the boy's face. The typical look of the local estate: shaven headed; a single stud in one ear; the fingers that strayed to his mouth stained nicotine yellow.

"In your shoes, I'd have done exactly the same. Anyone would."

"I tried to grab her, but the whole thing came down so fast."

Elaine knew she must locate her voice. "Excuse me." She pressed into the narrow void between them. "You're talking about a girl."

"Sorry Gov." Flustered, another man who had elbowed his way through spectators interrupted - the man in the fluorescent jacket. "God knows where the mother went. She was over by the alley a minute ago."

I specifically asked her -”

“I’m the mother.” As Elaine spoke the words, she knew them to be true.

Recognising her, the man back-tracked. “N-now, we can’t be sure, Madam.”

“I’m sure. I sent her to the corner shop over an hour ago.” The four exchanged glances: Elaine, the policeman, the boy and the man in the yellow jacket, whose gaze settled on the tips of his steel-capped boots.

There were shouts; high-pitched, urgent. The cue for them all to turn.

A mottled man with ashen hair stepped from the thick of the dust: “We’ve uncovered the phone box. Hardly a dent in the frame, but...” He whistled through his front teeth.

Elaine saw the skeleton of the box dissected by a metal scaffolding pole, entry wound in the safety glass. Standing astride a pile of bricks, a man in a hard hat became spokesperson for their thoughts: “Christ Almighty! It would have gone clean through her.”

At this, the policeman’s eyes darted towards Elaine. “I think you’d be more comfortable over by the ambulance, Madam.”

But Elaine’s eyes were fixed on the boy. *Clean through*. On hearing those words, the movement of his Adam’s apple was as visible as his distress, and for the first time Elaine understood the phrase, ‘to eat one’s words’. Not something deliberately taken back, but mute shock: involuntary, uncontrolled. He folded himself in half, hands on knees, and the policeman bent over him. “Alright, son. You did the right thing, see?” And through the criss-cross of headlights, the dust and chaos, he raised his head, shouting, “Can we get some more help over here? Let’s keep digging.”

Men who had been on garden duty refused flimsy facemasks which hung lifelessly from a proffered wrist by their elastic straps. Jackets were pressed into wives’ arms as they brushed past, grim-faced, rolling up shirt sleeves.

Turning her attention to the boy, Elaine asked, “Are you a friend of Judy’s?”

“I never seen her before.” The boy’s arms were clamped together from wrists to elbows. “She just walked past me on her way to the phone box. She was...” He squeezed his eyes shut.

“What? She was what?”

The boy nodded, as if trying to dislodge the word. “Beautiful.”

“Madam?” The yellow-jacketed man was saying firmly, one hand hovering, ready to guide.

“And you, son,” the policeman said. “We’ll take it from here. You should get yourself seen to.”

“I can’t.” He shook his head.

“Stubborn so and so, aren’t you? Want to see it through to the bitter end, is that it?”

Elaine didn’t remember running forwards to the point where the beams converged. She was aware only of the hands that bruised her upper arms, dragging her from the place where she’d been clawing in the debris. Knees bent, she was airlifted like a child, mid-tantrum. “I’m her mother!”

“Come on, now. Get a grip.”

Lowering her feet, Elaine allowed herself to be led away, understanding the need to prepare for whatever emerged from the rubble. She had seen its density, had a sense of its weight. Slump-shouldered, perched on the cold tailgate of an ambulance, she gave her name and address, Judy’s date of birth. No, her daughter hadn’t been taking any medication. Had no allergies she was aware of. There was no history of heart disease, fainting or fits. Religion? Elaine recited the response she always gave: Christian.

A blank-faced stranger placed a steaming mug of tea in her hands, and draped a bobbed cardigan around her shoulders. “Here, love. You must be freezing.”

These were simply things that happened. Waiting for confirmation of the inevitable, Elaine felt detached from the hands that circled the mug, dirt embedded under torn fingernails. Airborne dust accumulated in her eyelashes and, like a cow persistently bothered by flies, she made no attempt to brush it aside.

Taking a five-minute break from the quarrying, a dry-coughing man thumped his chest. “S’cuse me. Gets right inside you, that stuff.”

“Look at that.” She allocated words to the things she saw. “Your hand’s bleeding.”

Voice rasping, he dismissed his injury. “Looks worse than it is.”

“You don’t even know us.”

Observations, devoid of meaning. One more voice added to the sound of the crowd. Elaine focused on the boy, the last person to see Judy. Even reduced to a shaking wreck wrapped in a foil blanket, he refused to leave, pointing to the place where he saw a beautiful girl disappear. *Her beautiful girl.*

“You’re welcome to come indoors.” The tailgate dipped as the woman who had brought tea leant against the ambulance, grazing Elaine’s arm with an elbow.

“No, I’m fine here.” She shuffled away from the unwanted interruption. *Oh, Christ, what would Judy look like now?* One of her hands pulled at the flesh around her mouth.

“Then I’ll keep you company.”

Nodding - or it might have been that her whole body was rocking - Elaine realised her face was wet. “Judy should have been doing her homework. It should have been me!”

“Don’t think like that.” Warmth encircled a small portion of Elaine’s arm. The rest of her shivered. “It doesn’t do any good.”

Then, the shout: “*It’s a hand! We’ve found her!*”

Elaine heard a cry and knew it was her own. She started forwards, only to find herself bundled face-first into a solid wall of chest: captured.

“There, now. Let’s allow the men to do their job, shall we?”

Realising that the purpose of the muscular arms was to comfort rather than restrain, Elaine gave up her struggle. All around were the static sounds of walkie-talkies, muffled replies muttered into collars. People who had previously slumped stood upright, striding about purposefully. The cordon at the end of the road was removed, onlookers ordered to stand well back, herded by slow-moving vehicles being made ready.

Straining her neck Elaine appealed, “Can’t I at least see?”

There was hesitation before the hands were loosened. The man moved around her so that he was by her side, still gripping her, as if she couldn’t be trusted. Two men jumped lightly from the back of the ambulance carrying a weightless stretcher, while a third rumbled about preparing a plastic bag for the drip. The siren was tested, several short abortive bursts. Even then, Elaine’s free arm acted independently, reaching in the direction of the pile of rubble, the hand robotic and claw-like. It pulled at her body, trying to wrench her away from the soothing words, from the inviting rectangles of electric light cast from doorways.

“Almost there.” His voice steady, the man repositioned his arm, wrapping it around her shoulder.

Through dark slatted figures, Elaine saw Judy prostrate on the stretcher. Segments of body, a head lolling, one shattered arm hanging limply. Slow motion: a funeral march. This time, unable to help herself, she broke free. Once loose, but for a couple of staggered steps, Elaine found she was unable to move.

“Mrs Jones.” The lady paramedic who had dealt with the form-filling reached for her. “I know how it looks, but what you’re seeing is dust.”

Even the weight of a hand was too great. Elaine’s legs buckled. *To dust we will return.* Sitting on the lip of the pavement, staring wide-eyed at a double yellow line, a thought entered her mind: *I can’t stop here.* Her feet scrambled against tarmac.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” An anxious face loomed in front of her. “We’re taking your daughter to May Day. She’ll be rushed into surgery. Why don’t you get yourself together and follow in the other ambulance?”

Grit grated as Elaine blinked. “She’s alive?”

“Yes. And we’ll do everything we can to keep her that way.”