

Chapter 1

It was dark, and I didn't know where I was. I was lying on a narrow cobblestone street, or alleyway, hemmed in by tall bleak walls, the only light a faint yellow streetlight glowing in the distance through the fog. Nothing looked familiar. A chill ran through me, prickling my flesh. What was it? I felt more afraid than I had ever felt before in my life. The thought rushed through my mind that I was in the wrong place. I had to get out of there. I didn't know why. My head hurt. Not a headache, but a sharp pain, as if I had suffered a blow to my head. I had the sense that something terrible had happened, like a terrorist attack. A bomb had gone off, there had been an explosion, or something like that. If I lay still, soon someone would be coming to help me. Maybe there were others injured too.

Then a new fear swept over me. Where was Courtney? Had she been hurt too? The thought that my daughter might be lying nearby hurt made me forget my own pain as I lifted my head and looked about desperately. There was no one nearby. And yet I had the feeling I was not alone in the dark alley. There was a sound—a sort of shuffling, a gurgle, gnawing, wheezing. I couldn't identify it, but it made my skin crawl. I wanted to cry out, but I was too afraid. There was something terrible in that alley with me, and I knew instinctively that I must not draw attention to myself. Was it an animal? A dog? A wolf? The sounds were like that of an animal feeding. If I lay still, would it go away without noticing me?

Cautiously I looked about again. Yes, this time I saw something. A shadow farther up the alleyway, not an animal but a man bending over something shapeless and inert. His back was to me and he was doing something to it. He squatted beside it, intent on his work. I felt I must not disturb him. He didn't know I was there. He thought he was alone. I would wait until he was gone and then I would try to move.

As if he had just sensed my presence, he froze, head lifted, alert, listening. I tried not to breathe. Was that a knife in his hand? He rose to his feet. Whatever the object was, he quickly wrapped something around it. A cloth maybe. Or a newspaper. He held it cradled against his chest as he walked toward me. He glided noiselessly across the distance that separated us. I closed my eyes tightly, held my breath, and hoped he wouldn't notice me. No such luck. He was standing over me. I didn't have to open my eyes to know that. If he squatted down beside me, what should I do? I didn't think I could jump up and run. I could tell him I didn't belong here. I could tell him it was all a mistake. I thought again of that knife. Had I just witnessed a murder? I would tell him I had seen nothing. I would swear to keep his secret. In the distance faintly I could hear a woman singing off-key. Did he hear it too? Please let her come this way, I prayed. He nudged my arm with his shoe. I kept my eyes tightly shut and wondered if he could hear my heart beating. It was beating so hard it hurt my chest. All I could think of was that at any moment he might plunge that knife into me. There was no one to stop him. Certainly I couldn't stop him. I wasn't even sure I could cry out.

Somewhere a bell began to toll. Once, twice, three times. Maybe it reminded him of the time. In any case, he strolled away then, whistling a tune I didn't recognize. As it faded away, I turned my head and saw him disappearing into the fog.

After that I must have lost consciousness. The next time I woke it was to the indistinct murmur of voices. Opening my eyes, I saw two men bending over the shapeless heap where the man had squatted before. I wondered if I should call to them and tell them I was hurt. Before I could make up my mind, one broke away and loped down the street toward the streetlight. He's gone for help, I told myself, and a wave of relief swept over me. Someone over there was hurt worse than I was, and they would help her first, and then they would help me. My head was throbbing and I didn't want to move it and make the throbbing worse. It was cold too, and I was shivering. It had begun to drizzle and my face felt wet now and my clothes unpleasantly damp. It didn't matter. I told myself everything would be all right now.

The man was soon back with a policeman, but such an odd-looking policeman with a quaint old-fashioned helmet on his head and a lantern in his hand. He didn't really look like a policeman at all but more like somebody wearing a costume. Maybe he had been called away from a party. It seemed strange, but then everything seemed strange—and in any case he had a light. That was what mattered. He held his lantern over the shapeless heap and let out an exclamation of horror. So that shapeless heap was a person. I had known that, hadn't I? Please God, don't let it be Courtney, I prayed, remembering my daughter might be badly injured, dead even. All three men talked together, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Their British accents were too thick. Gradually more men arrived, stepping from doorways I hadn't noticed or materializing out of the fog. They all had to squat by that shapeless heap as if it were some kind of ghastly shrine. I knew the person must be dead; otherwise they would try to help him. Or her. One man came up the alley, leaned his hand against the wall, and vomited. I thought he would surely see me but he didn't. It was as if I were invisible.

"I came out to go to work and there she was, just lyin' there," one man said. "I thought it was a tarp at first that someone had rolled up and thrown away. I almost stepped on her before I realized. . . . Who'd do a thing like that?"

"Hey, bring a light over here," said a man's voice not more than a few feet from me.

There was a scramble of movement. I closed my eyes at the light that was held over me.

"Suppose that's him?" someone said.

"Some poor sod sleeping it off more likely. Can't you smell the wine?"

"Is that blood?"

"Back off, will you," ordered a gruff voice. "Let's get the surgeon over here. Dr. Ellman! There's another one over here."

I told myself I should open my eyes, but something held me back, like when I was a child and my mother had opened the bedroom door to check on me before going to bed and I had kept my eyes closed, pretending to sleep.

"Let's have a look then," said a new voice. "Has this one been cut up too?"

"Not so far as I can see," said another. Maybe this was the man holding the lantern. "But there's blood on his head."

I knew they were talking about me, but I didn't understand why they thought I was a man. Or was it just some peculiar British way of speaking, mixing up their pronouns?

I felt someone prod my forehead and let out an involuntary gasp at the pain which shot through my head. I opened my eyes and blinked at the glare of the lantern thrust in my face.

"Well, he's alive at any rate."

"Looks like someone hit him on the head. Nasty knock but he'll live. No knife wounds so far as I can see. Can you sit up, sir?"

I didn't think I could, but hands pulled me to a sitting position before I could protest.

“Blimey, it’s a woman,” someone said, and I fell back down as they let go of me. Of course I’m a woman, I wanted to say, but my head hurt too much to speak. I just wanted to curl up in a ball and sleep again.

“You think he hit her in the head?”

“If he did, she was lucky that’s all he did.”

“You don’t need to stand around and gawk,” one voice muttered, probably the surgeon.

They sat me up again like a rag doll. This time they propped me against the wall behind me. I whimpered in protest as the man touched my temple again.

“It’s a nasty bump, but it’s almost stopped bleeding. I’m going to bandage it up.”

“Thank you,” I said. My words were hardly more than a whisper. My throat felt dry and raspy.

“What’s your name?” he asked as he wrapped my head.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. The lantern had been set nearby on the ground and I could see him now, an elderly man, kind-faced, with a short grey beard and glasses. He wore a round hat with a brim. No one wore hats like that anymore. Maybe he had been at the same costume party as the policeman.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Well, you got knocked on the head,” he said.

“No, I mean over there.” I looked toward the small knot of men.

He sighed. “Well, a poor unfortunate woman got herself murdered.”

It wasn’t Courtney, I told myself. Wherever Courtney was, she wasn’t here.

“Where am I?”

“Buck’s Row.”

I had never heard of it. “Why am I here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you were on your way someplace. Or on your way home. Do you live around here?”

I tried to think and drew an absolute blank. I didn’t know where I was and I couldn’t remember where I lived. “I don’t think so.”

“What’s your name?”

Now I began to feel frightened. Of course I knew my name. How could I not know my name? I just couldn’t think of it right that minute.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You got a pretty hard knock on the head. A little rest and you’ll remember.”

“She see anything?” asked a short man with a bristly mustache who had just come up to us. He wasn’t wearing a policeman’s uniform but spoke with an air of authority.

The surgeon was standing now. He looked down at me doubtfully.

“Christ, she smells like she fell in a wine vat,” said the other man in disgust. “And how come she’s dressed like that?”

He was right about the smell. I could smell it myself now, a sickening sweetish stench. I had been half aware of it before but had thought it must be something else in the alley.

“Did you see anything?” asked the surgeon, looking down at me.

I thought about the man squatting by the shapeless heap. The awful feeling of fear and dread washed over me again, and I started to shiver uncontrollably.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to question her later,” the surgeon said.

“But maybe she could tell us something,” the other man protested. “If she saw something—”

“Maybe she did, and maybe she didn’t,” said the surgeon. “Right now she can’t even remember her name or where she lives. That doesn’t make her a very reliable witness.”

The man with the bristly mustache glared down at me, and I huddled closer to the wall, trying to stop my teeth from chattering.

“So what do we do with her? You want me to take her to the station?”

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary. Maybe I’ll take her home with me.”

The man scowled. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“And why not? Do you think she’ll steal the silver or murder us in our sleep?”

“She’s probably a whore,” the man said. “What else would she be doing out on the streets at this time of night? And clearly she’s had a drop too much.”

His words shocked me. I wanted to protest. I didn’t know why I was there, but I knew I was not a prostitute and I certainly wasn’t drunk.

The surgeon was called away then to examine the body once more before they moved it. I lay my head on my knees and listened to their muffled voices. I felt unbearably lost and alone. I wanted to go home, but I had no idea where that was.

Perhaps I lost consciousness again. The next thing I knew the surgeon’s hand was on my shoulder, gently shaking me. I looked around, confused. Where was I? A narrow alleyway, men with lanterns, a smell of decay and sewers, the chill night air. It came back to me in a rush. A woman had been murdered. Involuntarily my eyes sought the spot. Yes, the shapeless heap was still there. I glanced quickly away, not wanting to see it.

The surgeon was holding out his hand to help me to my feet. With effort I got up.

“Easy now,” he said.

I was surprised how stiff I was. I had sat too long on the hard cobblestones. And I was dizzy. If it had not been for the surgeon’s arm, I would have fallen.

He led me toward the streetlight. It was an old section of the city, a cobblestone street and gaslights, or electric ones made to look like them. Several horse-drawn carriages were lined up at the curb when we reached the corner. I looked down the dark foggy street. Not a car in sight. It was as if I had stepped into the past. I shivered.

The surgeon stopped when we reached the nearest of the waiting carriages.

“We’re going to ride in this?” I said, surprised.

“Well, you’re in no shape to walk,” he said, holding the door for me.

I climbed in carefully, grateful there was a step by the door. Inside two seats faced each other. I took one and the doctor seated himself across from me. Our knees nearly touched. Perhaps cars weren’t permitted in this section of London, I told myself. Perhaps the city was trying to keep it authentic for the tourists.

The carriage lurched as it took off. I could hear the horse’s hooves striking the cobblestones and the clatter of the carriage wheels. It bounced terribly, making my head hurt again. I raised my hand and tentatively touched the bandage wrapped around my temple. Through the window I saw dark dingy buildings roll by.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Whitechapel.”

The name seemed vaguely familiar. I was sure I had heard of it. It was famous, but I couldn’t remember why.

“You aren’t from here, are you?” the doctor said. “You have an accent. Are you from the States?”

The States? He meant the United States of course. "Yes," I said, relieved to have remembered something about myself. "Yes, I am."

"Well, that explains a lot," he said.

"Does it?" I had no idea what it explained, but if I remembered where I was from, maybe I could also remember who I was.

"Like the way you're dressed."

The way I was dressed? What did he mean? I glanced down at my jacket, my jeans, my walking shoes. They seemed familiar enough. I tried to remember when I had put them on. If I could remember that, I would know where to go back to. But it was all a blank.

"I wish I could remember!"

"Never mind," he said kindly. "Give it time. It'll come back to you. I've seen cases like this before. It may come back gradually in pieces or all at once."

"Amnesia," I whispered, the word floating up from the dark well of my mind. I tried to think what I knew about amnesia. "Does it take long for the memories to come back?"

"That depends," he said. "Sometimes it takes weeks. Sometimes months. Sometimes even years."

"Years!" I felt a rush of alarm. I didn't have years to wait for my memory to come back.

"Don't fret about it. Chances are someone will come looking for you. Like your husband."

Did I have a husband? I couldn't remember. There was no wedding ring on my finger.

"Or another family member," he suggested.

"Courtney!" The image of my tall lovely daughter flashed into my mind. Of course. She would be wondering where I was.

"Courtney?" the doctor said, his glasses glinting as we passed a streetlight.

"My daughter."

"Well, there. You're starting to remember already."

My momentary joy at the thought of Courtney quickly gave way to anxiety. Where was Courtney? Was she also lying in some dark alleyway? Surely we had been together at the time of the attack, or whatever it was that had happened. No, there was no attack, I told myself. The surgeon would know about it. There would have been rubble if a bomb had gone off. No, there had only been that intense feeling of fear and the man bending over a shapeless heap.

"I saw him," I said.

"Saw who?"

"The man who killed that woman."

The doctor watched me through his spectacles. "You saw his face?"

"No, just his back."

He sighed. "I doubt that will help much."

We both lapsed into silence then. I looked out the carriage window at the dark buildings. Nothing looked familiar.

He pulled a big gold watch on a chain from his vest pocket and checked it. "It's nearly five. It'll be light soon."

"It's very kind of you to offer me a place to stay," I said.

"That's quite all right. I'm sure you'll be much more comfortable at my house than at the station."

The house at which we alighted was on a more spacious street, not hemmed in by buildings. It was lined with two and three story houses packed closely together. I saw no cars, which again

struck me as strange. The doctor helped me climb out of the carriage, and it drove on, the clop-clop of the horse's hooves echoing away into the night.

He opened the door and I stepped into a narrow hall lit dimly by a lamp in the nearest room. Then he pulled a rope which summoned a young woman with pretty blonde hair curling around her face, blue eyes, and a robe that fell to the floor. She looked as if she had just woken up.

"This is Lucy," he said. "She'll show you where to freshen up. You should get out of those wet clothes too before we have a case of ague on our hands." He turned to the girl, who was looking at me with obvious disapproval. "Lucy, find her some clean clothes to put on. And get her something to eat if she's hungry."

"Sir, Mrs. Haslip won't like me poking about in the larder and it's only a few hours till breakfast," the girl protested.

"I'm sure Mrs. Haslip won't mind. Oh, and make up a bed for her, will you?"

"Will she be staying then?"

"I don't know. That all depends—" He broke off. "Yes, I suppose she will be."

Lucy looked me over again with distaste.

"I don't want to be any trouble," I said.

"Trouble? Nonsense," the doctor said. "And now I think I'll go upstairs and wash up and try to get a bit of sleep before I head for the mortuary."

He hung his hat on a hat rack near the door and then climbed the stairs.

"Well, don't just stand there, follow me," Lucy said. "I think the back room should do fine for the likes of you."

She led me into a kitchen and from there into a small washroom. The water that ran out of the spigot into a small old-fashioned looking sink was not warm, but I was able to wash my hands and splash water on my face. There was a small oval mirror over the sink and I could see myself in it. I looked tired, my hair was frizzy from the dampness, and the bandage wrapped around my head made me look like a war casualty.

Lucy stood in the doorway watching me with hostile eyes. "You ought to be ashamed."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You don't fool me. I can see what you are. You got a nerve coming into a respectable house like this."

"Like what?" I had no idea what she was inferring.

"You reek to high heaven of it," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I realized she meant the wine on my clothes. "I'm afraid I do," I agreed. "I have no idea what happened."

"You don't need to put on airs with me," she said archly. "I know what you are."

"What am I then?" I had no idea why she had taken such a dislike to me.

"You're a prostitute, you are."

This was the second person since I had woken up in the alleyway to assume I was a prostitute. I glanced back at the mirror. I saw myself, tired, a bandage wrapped rakishly around my temple, blood smeared on my cheek, no makeup, a woman in her early forties. Why did they think I was a prostitute?

"I am not a prostitute," I assured her. "And I'm very tired and I would very much appreciate it if I could just lie down for a bit. My head hurts and . . . I saw a woman murdered tonight." Suddenly I felt as if I would start crying if she gave me any more trouble. I had reached my limit. In fact, I was well beyond it.

She blinked. "You saw a woman murdered?"

She must have seen that I was on the verge of tears because suddenly she looked contrite. "I'm sorry. I guess I better find some clothes for you to put on."

She led me to a little room near the kitchen with a narrow saggy bed, a small bureau, a hooked rug, and not much else, then went away, to return shortly with sheets and a blanket.

"I can make it," I said.

The young woman shrugged. "Suit yourself." She spread out a dress on the bed. It was floor-length with long sleeves and hooks up the back.

"What's that?" I asked.

"As you can see, it's a dress, and way too good for the likes of you, if you ask me."

I stared at it. Surely she didn't expect me to wear something so out-of-date? Was she serious?

"What's the matter?"

"I think I'd prefer to just wear my own clothes," I told her.

"But you can't. You've spilled wine on them. They need to be washed."

She was right. But still—that dress! The girl left the room so I could change. I removed my still damp clothes and folded them in a neat pile on the floor. Then I pulled the dress over my head and struggled into it. I had it on when she came back to get my clothes, but I had only managed to get half of the hooks fastened. She had to help me with the rest.

"Breakfast will be in about another hour and a half," she said when she had finished hooking me up. "If you'd like to nap, I can wake you when it's ready."

I looked in dismay from the dress to the black high-top shoes that sat on the floor beside my walking shoes. The two pairs of shoes looked incongruous sitting next to each other. A thought struck me.

"What's the date?" I asked uneasily.

"The day?" Lucy said. "Why it's Friday."

"No, the *date*."

"The thirty-first of August."

"I mean the year. What year is it?"

She looked at me dumbfounded. "That must be quite a knock you got if you don't even remember the year."

"*Please*." I was trying not to panic.

"1888, of course," she said with perfect equanimity.

I caught my breath. It wasn't possible. This was some kind of joke—they did this for tourists, just like the horse-drawn carriages and the old-fashioned dress. They were all pretending to live in the past. That or they were all crazy.

Lucy was looking at me strangely. "Are you all right? Do you want me to fetch Dr. Ellman?"

I shook my head again, not trusting myself to speak. I wanted her to go away so I could think. There had to be some kind of explanation. It could not possibly be 1888. It was the twenty-first century. Lucy had picked up my clothes now and was headed toward the door.

"Wait!" I could hear the desperation in my voice.

She stopped in her tracks, wary.

"Where are you taking my clothes?" I tried to sound normal. I didn't want to frighten her.

"To wash them, of course."

"I don't want them washed," I said, feeling panic at the idea that I would have nothing to wear but the ridiculous old-fashioned dress. It was as if a piece of my identity were being taken away. Or my sanity. I had to have something of myself to hold onto, something to remind me who I was.

“But they’re dirty,” Lucy protested.

“I can wash them myself,” I said, grasping at some excuse to keep her from taking them away.

“We aren’t going to steal them, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she said in an offended tone.

“I didn’t mean that. I just meant, why should you have to go to the trouble of washing my clothes? I’m perfectly capable of washing them myself.”

“It’s no trouble.” She eyed me narrowly.

I saw I was going to have to let her take my soiled clothes. If I kept arguing, she would think I was not right in my head and would probably tell the doctor. Until I could figure out what to do, I had to behave as normally as possible. I must not let myself go to pieces. If this was a game, I would have to play it, at least until I could figure out what to do.

Still watching me distrustfully, Lucy left the room with my clothes in her arms.

Once she was gone, I immediately leaped up and began to search the room, opening the drawers of the little bureau, looking under the bed, examining the small hooked rug on the floor. Discouraged at not finding anything that would prove it was not 1888, I sat down on the bed and stared at the two high-top shoes. One thing was for sure. They were made for someone with smaller feet than mine. They wouldn’t fit me like my walking shoes. My walking shoes! I grabbed them up. There was my proof. Surely they didn’t have shoes like that in 1888. I was tempted to put them back on. Certainly they would be more comfortable than the high-tops. But if these people saw them, they might take them away from me—my only proof that it was not 1888. No, it was probably better to hide them for now. I pushed my walking shoes under the bed until they didn’t show. It wasn’t an ideal hiding place, but they were certainly too big to hide under the lumpy feather pillow and were likely to be found if I shoved them into a drawer. Now I felt better. The pain in my head had subsided to a dull ache. I spread the sheets and the prickly wool blanket on the bed and lay down on it. On second thought I crawled under the blanket because I was cold. I didn’t think I could sleep, but I had hardly closed my eyes before I drifted off.