

## ONE

---

### STRANGER IN THE CROWD

It was almost a relief for her to see the kid bounce off the bonnet and turn full circle in the air. The sickly thud of his head against the car was one thing, but the sound it made when it impacted against the road in front of it was something else. Soggy, dull, wet; like some kind of enormous fruit dropped from a height onto clay floor tiles.

There was no doubt in her mind.

He was dead. And that was that.

The car had rounded the corner way too quickly, its adolescent driver too inexperienced and paying way too little attention to the road ahead. The woman waiting at the side of the road had seen the mobile phone pressed against his ear, his eyes vaguely checking himself out in the tilted rear view mirror. It was a wonder he even made the corner at all.

He hadn't seen the boy stray out across the road, hadn't seen him ducking away from his mother's side in the direction of the ice-cream van, wide eyes illuminated with the promise of a vanilla cone with a stubby flake wedged in it. It took a fleeting moment for the accident to play through, a few moments to have the car skid noisily to an angled halt, and then a few

more moments for the boy's mother to turn startled and recognise the tangled mass of pliant limbs lying in the street as her child. But when she did, those screams rose like fire in a fuel depot, and they slashed the air without respite for a good ten minutes or more.

The woman had watched it all from across the street, even before the consoling crowd had begun to gather. She watched the young driver stagger out of the car and puke. She watched the mother tumble awkwardly at her dead son's side. She watched it all with a kind of dull weary gaze that commuters get when they see the same landscapes roll pass over and over again on their way to work each morning. The woman on the edge of the street had this gaze because she'd seen death so many times before; the death of an infant, the death of a grown man, it made little difference - some just screamed more than others. She'd seen it all.

She wondered briefly, even as she crossed the street towards them, whether she should just let the child be, let him wither and decay in the ground like dead people did. But before she had even managed to reach a decision, she was already kneeling beside the bloodied twisted body of the youngster with her hands pressed against two of his snapped ribs.

The buzz of the crowd drifted into an uneasy dirge of whispers at her back as she closed her eyes, and even the mother's unearthly sobs died down somewhat, but the woman persisted at her labours, massaging the bruised meat of the boy's torso, kneading his snapped joints and the shattered bones, feeling the blood, feeling its heat, until the small boy's heart suddenly jerked with the memory of its former pulse and began to beat once again, his wide eyes flickering skyward as though in praise of the God in residence.

The woman tried to get away, oh God how she tried. But there had been a miracle performed in front of their very eyes and they weren't about to let go of her that easily. But once the kid was on his feet and examining the holes made in his school uniform from the thirty yard stretch of bloodied tarmac he'd been thrown across, the crowd relinquished their hold on her to inspect him, to check for wounds and permanent damage beneath his ragged outfit, and it was in that moment that she took her usual chance and slipped away from their attention.

The mother couldn't care less at the time. She'd already snatched up her child and was cradling him to the point of asphyxiation, holding him tight to her breast. The woman, meanwhile, was already back on the other side of the street and heading towards what shadows there were on an otherwise hot summer's day, shying away from the crowd's attention, disappearing out of sight (even as her guilt crawled over her thoughts like a sickness) before the first of the ambulance sirens harried the air.

No one caught up with her for nearly two weeks. The mother stood on the threshold to her flat, her boy at her leg. He had a few remaining traces of cuts on his cheek and chin but that was all. He was well on the mend considering what he had been through. The woman stared at them both without expression from behind the partially open door, her eyes narrowing at this unwanted intrusion.

"Someone told me they had seen you here," the mother said, "and I just wanted to come and say thank you, thank you for saving Ryan's life. I never got a chance to say thanks before because, well, you just seemed to disappear."

Isabel looked her up and down for a few moments, the front door between them still held in her hand. She knew that the mother wanted to come in and bestow even more praise upon her, and maybe there was something in her thoughts about a gift or reward too. But she just wanted silence, that was all, and to be left alone too of course, but they were things too valuable and all too unobtainable. She did, however, relent finally when she cast the boy a look and saw a crooked smile on his face for her, a sanguine mask of uncertain joy upon lips the colour of dead flesh.

"You'd better come in then," she found herself saying, and stepped back to allow them into her home.

"My name's Debbie Fry," the mother said, "and this is Ryan, my youngest."

"You have more children then?"

"One more, a daughter, Sarah. She's getting on for seventeen now."

Isabel Rider stared at her, allowing the uneasy pause to hasten the woman's visit.

"Look, you're probably busy, so I'll just tell you what I came to tell you and then I'll be on my way. I felt so blessed about Ryan and what you did for him that I had to do something to thank you properly."

Isabel's gaze intensified at this. She didn't like the way this was going, nor indeed the way Debbie Fry's thoughts were arranging themselves inside her head, collecting on the back of her tongue like little parcels waiting to be delivered.

"I contacted the local paper," Debbie Fry went on, "and they thought the same as I did that they would love to do an article on you."

Isabel grimaced at this, and even clenched her

teeth at the prospect. It was then that her words changed to match her expression, and they flew from her tongue as bitter as acid.

"I helped your son because I could -"

"Yes, and I thank you for that -"

"Let me finish, will you? I saved him because he was dead. He was gone Mrs Fry, do you understand? I could go one further and say that his life belonged to me. But I didn't want him, and so I gave him back to you. But was this enough? No. You had to go further."

Debbie Fry went to speak again but Isabel silenced her with a hand.

"I don't want your newspaper attention any more than I want your thanks. I want to be left alone, can you understand that? I want to sit here in my flat and listen to the silence. Now I've accepted your thank you's with good grace and now I'd like you to leave with your boy."

Debbie Fry stared at the woman with something close to disbelief, perhaps even outrage. Isabel could almost hear the thoughts build inside her head:

*How dare you not want my son?*

*How dare you not want to be in the paper?*

She voiced out loud her reasoning for the newspaper article, but Isabel had already heard enough and hushed her brusquely before her lips had finished flapping. A moment later and Isabel was on her feet, a knife whipped swiftly from her jacket pocket and clutched tightly in her hand.

"I gave life back to him," Isabel cried as she lunged at him, "and I'm damned sure I can take it back if I want to." And with that she drew the keen edge of the blade swiftly across his throat, spilling a sudden torrent of blood down his small frightened chest. The boy made hardly any movement at all, so deft and

sudden did the knife come, but his little fingers still made some attempt to haul back the folds of his throat, his legs tensing and shuddering for only a moment, before he slipped awkwardly to one side and slumped dead in his chair.

Debbie Fry held a silent scream for only a handful of seconds before the shrill sound actually made its way out. Isabel's blade wanted her throat too, wanted to hack it in two and silence it, just as swiftly and neatly as she had done her boy's. But she didn't want two murders, not today.

She dropped the knife to the ground and took hold of Debbie Fry's shoulders, shaking her hard until she could almost hear her teeth rattle. The screaming stopped, but a kind of hyperventilating blubber took its place, and all the woman could do was stare helplessly at the woman who had just butchered her child.

"I don't want the publicity and I don't want to kill people. I just want to be left alone." She wanted her head to be silent too, but so muddy was it with voices and guilt that she'd never tell another living soul about it, let alone this sobbing half-wit in front of her. "I told you your boy's life belongs to me and I'll take it back if I want."

In the bulging staring eyes of Debbie Fry, Isabel could see a glimmer of a nod, but in those eyes she could also see what the mother saw. A lunatic that had just killed a ten year old boy. She'd never wanted to be this way, not even in the beginning, but so heavy was her burden, so bludgeoning... how was she to cope? How was she to cope alone?

Isabel let her grip slacken and watched as the mother stumbled back under her own weight. She looked at her for a few moments, watching the

shudders pass through her, watch her eyes glance down at her youngest child in a glistening sticky gown of his own young blood. She followed this unholy gaze, and took in the sight of the boy killed by her own hand. How crazy was this, she thought crazily to herself, even as her own tears started to come? Was this death? Had she even given him life back a fortnight ago?

She turned and went down on one knee beside him. Lifting her hand up towards his exposed throat, slick milk-white cartilage visible between the sliced pulsing muscle still raising blood like a squeezed sponge, she placed her fingers against the ragged meat and watched as the wound slowly began to draw itself together, binding flesh against flesh, joining arteries whole. The blood began to course back through the boy's veins even before she had sealed his skin over her unnatural surgery, and his eyes shot open wide and white, settling open her as they had in the street two weeks ago, as a coarse gasp was sucked hard into his lungs. This wasn't life she was giving him, this was a sick curse. He'd died, the way he was meant to, and she'd stepped in and granted him this obscenity. Twice.

The tears were streaming down her cheeks as she let the boy up out of his seat, ushering him back towards his mother still sobbing behind her. Isabel couldn't even turn to look at her this time, so much had she already inflicted upon her family. All she could do was bow her head towards the floor and utter two short words:

"Just go."

She listened to their feet tramping slowly across the floor, the ghostly quiet returning once more to her living room as soon as the door closed behind them.

Soon it would be as silent as a morgue once again, and then she would be able to rest properly. Perhaps it would have been easier to have simply killed them both and left town. Maybe she wouldn't even have needed to leave. She could have simply taken the corpses out of the flat and dumped them elsewhere like real murderers did.

She ran her tensed fingers hard through her hair, clenching her fists so that it tugged at her scalp. She wanted to rip at her head until all the thoughts that she kept there were gone. She wanted to rip out her heart so that she could watch it beat its very last rhythm. But she knew nothing could ever stop her. Not now. Nothing she could do to harm herself could ever end this horror. She would only heal, whether she wanted to or not. It was inside her, the magic that had grown so deep into her being that she would never be able to be separated from it. It was unnatural, unholy, and it felt as though the very Devil himself seethed inside her veins. Yes, she could bring young boys back from the dead, but for what reason? What was the point of it all? She knew what such deeds did, and she knew what terrible anguish Debbie Fry was soon going to face.

Sure, she thought to herself, as she cast her eyes out through the grimy window at the world outside, you might have a few years of happiness before it starts, but it'll come, oh yes it'll come, and then you'll both be wishing for death. Oh yes, you'll both be wishing for oblivion.