

PROLOGUE

Kensal Rise, London 2 November 1940

First time, a bombed terrace house in Kensal Rise; first soul, a teacher who'd rather stay at home when the sirens went . . .

The house next door was mostly undamaged. The medic stepped over the lintel and squeezed down the little corridor past the lads from Heavy Rescue, stripped to their vests, all grazes and brick dust and faded tattoos. He ducked into the understairs cupboard and through the hole in the party wall into a mirror-image space, but with cushions, tinned food, a lantern, an eiderdown; a shelter the teacher didn't have to share.

But he'd never reached it.

Heavy Rescue had torn out the cupboard's wooden wall and used it to shore up rubble in the corridor beyond. The medic crossed it and scrambled into the tunnel the lads had dug through the rubble of the back room, roofed by a chunk of first-floor joists held up by props. A bugger to sledge in, he thought, with no room to swing and the dead weight of masonry, timbers, furniture all jumbled on top – must have taken most of the night. *Good lads all*. The tunnel jinked left to where the teacher's bed was supposed to be, and there was the Heavy Rescue team leader, bent over, scrambling back – a creak, a moan from old timbers? A jolt to the heart—

'She's sound,' reassured the team leader. 'And the gas is off.' He registered the medic's blue battledress, the armband, the steel helmet. 'You here for him?'

'Aye.'

'Sound as a pound.' He smiled through the brick dust. 'He's alive, unconscious, doesn't seem much marked but he's trapped across the chest. It'll take another four hours, perhaps more, for us to get him

out, and we're needed on other jobs. So, is it worth it? Can you do that?'

The medic nodded. 'It'll be rough and ready, chum – I'm no doctor – but I can do his vital signs, perhaps say what's damaged.'

'Can't say fairer.' He replied. 'I'll check on my lads then I'll be by the cupboard, all right?'

The medic let him by, then duckwalked to the end of the tunnel. He found he could stand upright – a patch in the corner of the room perhaps three feet wide where the roof had held and a settee had clotted loose rubble. Another lantern sat in the corner. Props braced an apparently intact wall. A high metal-framed bed jutted from the rubble, one corner embedded in the floorboards. And underneath, sticking out, the teacher's legs – thick woollen socks, bare ankles, grey long johns, and pyjama trousers rucked up to near the knee.

The medic turned on his torch. The angled bed-frame had trapped the man's upper torso, but beyond it his head and arms were still free, sheltered by a big dresser that had been knocked over. *Why's his bed in his back parlour?* He shook his head, aware he was putting off the moment he'd have to stick his head under the rubble. *Time.*

Deep breath. He crawled under the dresser, neck prickling at the thought of the weight of debris piled on top. A pulse from the wrist; weak but steady. Head against mouth to hear breathing; a watery rattle – could be existing illness, but most likely broken ribs and blood in the lungs. He manipulated the right arm. No obvious fractures – he couldn't reach the left without lying across the man's face so left it alone. He moved the chin gently from side to side – upper spine apparently intact – then backed out around the frame to the legs. Stripped him from the waist down: no obvious fractures or signs of internal bleeding. Clothing back up for warmth.

What are his chances? he wondered. Not enough information. He could be bleeding to death in his chest or just have a bad cough – there was no way to tell without examining his upper torso. He nodded. He'd get back to give Heavy Rescue the answer they probably wanted least – no answer at all.

He stood up to rub his lower back.

There was a sickening crack below his feet, like a bone breaking. The bed-frame shifted and dust came down. He started for the tunnel,

but the leader was already scrambling through with a four-pound sledge and a couple of props.

‘Where was the crack?’

‘Underneath.’

‘Did the bed shift?’

‘Yes.’

‘The frame’s splitting the floor plate . . . That wall,’ he pointed, ‘is coming in. When it does, it all comes down. We might not have four minutes, never mind four hours.’ He set a prop and started sledging.

‘Got morphine?’

Life and death, he thought. ‘Yes.’

‘Up to you. But might be the best thing.’

Someone was in the tunnel. ‘Stan?’

‘Everyone out now,’ called the gaffer. ‘When this goes the party wall may too.’

‘Stan?’

‘I’ll stick with the medic. For a moment or two, anyway.’ He turned and offered a wary smile. ‘Down to you, chum. The wall goes, so does our escape route.’

‘Right.’ The medic’s throat was dry. Should he walk away? He’d taken no oath – he only picked up his satchel when his day job was done . . . But these lads – Stan might be outside now, having a fag. He had to go that bit further too. He crouched again, stuck his head under the dresser, hearing its creaks above Stan’s sledging.

The teacher’s eyes were open. The medic jerked up in shock, banged his head, froze. Everything was creaks now.

‘Stan?’ called the medic. ‘Lot of noise.’

‘Wall’s good.’

The medic was on all fours to scurry out backwards but the teacher’s hand on his arm startled him. The lantern showed the man’s mouth trying to shape words and his tongue flicked out to wet his lips, iridescent pink in bombsite browns and greys. The medic brought up his water bottle and the teacher lifted his head. A couple of gulps and the head went back, but the eyes stayed fixed on the medic’s face inches away.

‘My chest hurts.’

‘That’s because your bed’s come down on it, all right?’

‘And what’s on top of the bed?’

‘Well, bits an’ bobs an’ that.’

‘Can you get me out?’

‘It might take a bit of time.’ The medic was supposed to tell him the truth, but face to face, with the house perched about their ears, it was automatic to lie. ‘Back in a jiffy, chum.’ He crawled back into the void and pulled his satchel round. Stan’s ear was pressed to the wall as his hands ran up and down the crazed plaster, feeling for tremors in the brickwork behind. A chunk near the ceiling dropped onto one of the props. The medic’s hands were shaking as he reached in for the syringe and the morphine. He broke the neck off the ampoule cleanly. In with the needle, up with the plunger, repeat with the second ampoule, then the third to be sure. Tap for bubbles, squeeze to lose them. Exactly as in training, only 42 Pardoe Street wasn’t the town hall, and this time he was about to take a life.

He was back under the dresser in a moment. ‘I’ve got something for your pain, Mr . . .’

‘Torrance.’

‘We’ll have you back at school in no time. Now, this will take the edge off – let us dig you out quicker, all right?’ But the medic could hear the tension in his own voice. He bared Torrance’s wrist and squeezed the elbow to bring up the web of veins, nudged the torch-hilt to cast more light, syringe now in his teeth—

‘Is this it?’

Left hand pinning the wrist, fingers bridging the vein, syringe down, Torrance’s other arm coming up to grab at his right shoulder—

‘Is this it?’

Plunger down.

‘Yes.’ Honesty? Anger at being seen through? Fear? He didn’t know. He was looking into Torrance’s eyes as he said it, six, nine inches away, and saw a flash of fury in them. Then the gleam started to slip away, the eyes dull, the pupils dilate, breath slacken . . .

Done.

He picked up his torch. Torrance’s eyes were closed. If he wasn’t dead now he would be in a minute or two, and the medic searched his face, looking for a sign. The mouth had fallen open, and as he stared there was a little click in the throat as if a well-oiled gate had

snicked shut, then a puff of breath. His soul, he thought, and reached out to catch it like a child would a bubble, but it was gone, freed, seeping through the rubble to join the chorus of new spirits milling above London.

After a moment he stirred. 'Clear,' he called, crawling out from under the dresser.

Stan was waiting by the tunnel entrance, eyes on the wall, more plaster off, a crack through a patch of bared brickwork. 'Gone?'

The medic nodded.

'Right, off we go.'

The medic scurried into the tunnel, Stan behind him, stumbling along at a crouch until suddenly he was fully upright and in the corridor next door, past the hallway pictures, then into the street, the rest of the lads starting from the front wall where they'd been waiting to lend a hand. 'Keep going!' from Stan, pushing the medic between his shoulder blades, out into the roadway, everyone looking back at 42 Pardoe Street and its crumpled front.

Safe. They clumped together, smokes cupped in hands as a nod to the blackout, watching the two houses, waiting. With its front bay sunken and first floor in, number 42 looked like an old bloke with no teeth, laid out in an open coffin. A couple of the Heavy Rescue lads nodded at the medic as if to say, 'Tough job, well done,' He nodded back. The copper marking the bombsite was off to one side looking no-mates, but suddenly he was heading over, hand out.' The medic would have turned away or steered for the Heavy Rescue van but for a sudden fellowship with everyone in the rescue game. He put his hand out too.

The house fell in with a sigh and a rumble, dust suspended against the three-quarter moon. The policeman had taken off his tin hat and was holding it over his heart. 'His soul has gone to the Lord. May he rest in peace.'

'Rest in peace,' the medic echoed, helmet in his hand. After a moment or two he put it back on his head and fixed the chin strap. He wondered if he would do this again, ever actually feel a soul, feel it slip through his fingers as life turned from light in the eyes to air from the mouth to eternity. He found himself hoping he might.

He didn't know it then, but that was how the Traveller was born.