

# Falling Off Air

## Chapter One

The shouting starts at around seven in the evening. A hot day, an oppressive dusk, and my neighbours the length of the street fling their windows wide open in the vain hope of admitting a breeze. The air smells singed. At first the voices are no more than a whisper. I have gone to the front of the house to put out the rubbish and, this being prime soap time, I assume the noise is scripted and broadcast. One of the voices is male, one female, but this early in the argument restraint still keeps them low if urgent and I cannot tell one word from another even if I wanted to.

Within half an hour, shrieks of indignation and hoots of ridicule are bouncing off our terraced, slate-clad walls, then back onto the curlicued red-brick mansions opposite. The voices seem to be amplified in the still air, and accusation and counter-accusation flow in through the open windows undistorted and devastating. By this point I am kneeling on the floor wresting the twins into their pyjamas but I am soon distracted by the yelling. I sit back on my heels to listen, letting go of Hannah, who crawls off cheerfully, believing herself for once victorious in the nightly struggle to go to bed naked. I am tempted to go to the window to get a better sense of where the voices come from, but they have enough problems without me sticking my nose in.

‘Of course you don’t understand, you selfish bastard,’ a woman screams, ‘you won’t let me...’ Here her voice continues, something about spending money, but a man’s voice is overlaid, calling the woman a bitch repeatedly until she falls silent. Unchallenged now by her, he gains in volume. ‘You’re a lying, blood-sucking whore,’ he yells, his voice breaking with emotion, muttering something that I cannot hear, then roaring, ‘What the fuck’s been going on in my house?’

‘Your house?’ Your...’ She – whoever she is – comes back at him enraged, but then a third voice intervenes, the light, anxious tone of a child, and there is no more screaming.

I grimace, my mind's eye in someone else's sitting room, windows open, a frightened girl or boy summoning the courage to say something, anything, to shut his parents, her parents, up. The argument is ugly even at a distance. The red cloud of rage lifts, of course, apologies can be made, accusations retracted. In this case, however, it is difficult to see how life can continue as normal, unless calling your wife a lying whore is normal.

My neighbours, both sides of the street, are a modest lot. They don't yell in public, they don't venture into the street naked, and God forbid they'd smile a hello to a stranger, but weather like this strips everyone down. We have been promised rain, but instead it just gets hotter and hotter, the air heavier and heavier for three days in a row. When the rain comes, it will empty the heavens.

\*

I was depositing William in his cot as the first clap of thunder broke above us and the rain descended like a waterfall, drumming suddenly against the window like someone trying to get in. I wondered whether our house was waterproof. It seemed unlikely that such a flimsy structure could be anything more than splashproof. It is perhaps overstating it even to call it a house. The estate agent talked about 'council house chic'. God knows how long it took him to dream that one up. It's like a little flat turned vertical, standing upright on its own patch of earth, its walls barely solid enough to hold it up. There are two feet of paved ground in front with a low concrete wall that has no function except it serves as our boundary, and a tiny garden at the back fenced with flimsy wood and chicken wire. Inside, mostly by virtue of its size, the house is cosy. I've had no time to do much to it, so it remains much as it was when I bought it, complete with garish paintwork and stained carpets. The best and warmest thing about it is an open fireplace. The agency

advertised it as a ‘period feature’, and it is indeed a Victorian fireplace. Of course when the house was built forty years ago that particular Victoria was long gone.

This is not the house I would have chosen. It is the house I could afford. A single income, double childcare bills and zero windfall on the horizon all added up to the smallest mortgage I could find. Our house and its little string of neighbours are a grey British version of shanty-town shacks compared to the red-brick Victoriana that graces the opposite pavement. They have intruder alarms and leaded windows like jewels in their heavy wooden doors. I have a doorbell that plays ‘Greensleeves’ off-key and a broken window at the back where next door’s eleven-year-old put a tennis ball through it.

By eight o’clock I’d fed, bathed and wrestled Hannah and William into their cots, plugged bottles of milk into their rosebud mouths, and I felt as though I’d run a marathon. I wiped the sticky remains of the twins’ teatime from my sleeves, poured myself a glass of Merlot and twitched the sitting-room curtain open, perching on the arm of the chair to watch the storm. My back was aching and I rolled my shoulders, feeling the crunch at the base of my neck, trying to ease the stress. The combined weight of the twins was now much the same as that of a baby elephant. Outside the ominously oppressive day had given way to an angry night. The trees and shrubs in the gardens opposite shuddered, rain fell in great swathes through the orange darkness, tossed and twisted by the wind.

The family who lived opposite hadn’t pulled their curtains shut yet, and I could see the cool blue of their high walls, the brass picture lights above framed prints. I frowned. Was it my imagination or could I hear voices again, straining over the storm. Surely everyone would have shut their windows. Unless, I thought, one was too distraught to notice a gale howling outside. A fork of lightning lit up the sky and then, just a moment later, a clap of thunder burst and shook my frail little house. Still, unlikely as it was, my ears caught at fractions of words, at shrieks and wails that seemed too human to belong to the storm. I gazed up the street, then down it, but the rain had driven everyone inside.

I am about to pull the curtains and shut out the weather when, at the margin of my vision, a woman falls out of the sky. I do not see how it began. All I see is that

she falls, feet first but tipping forward, arms stretched out as if to break her fall, her clothes as chaotically twisted and tossed as the rain, and the weight of her body carrying her down through the currents of air straight to the earth like an anchor. For a moment my brain cannot register what my eyes quite clearly see, what my ears hear: a scream that tangles with the whine of the wind so that they become one miserable chord. The moment she hits the ground the sound becomes thin again, just the wind on its own once more. The weather and everything else of no consequences are fixed in my mind for good now because of that moment of violence; scar tissue forming around the memory.

I stood up in agitation, my heart pounding, eyes wide, staring at the heap in the pathway of the house on the other side of the road. What should I do? What could I do? Energy flooded to my muscles and I ran, flinging open my front door, damp air filling my lungs. I reached her, squatted down, had to force myself to look closely. Until that point some part of me believed that the wind and the rain must have played a trick on my ears and on my eyes, but it was as I feared. The broken heap was, or had been a woman. She was wearing something long and loose that was now caught around limbs that had broken on impact, and long hair covered her head, her face turned into the ground. The rain was driving against the top of my own head, pouring down into my eyes and I had to peer, eyes half shut, down at her. It seemed to me that another, darker, liquid was seeping from under her head, but I couldn't be sure. I couldn't tell if she was breathing so I laid my fingertips lightly on her back to see whether I could sense a rise and fall. I could detect nothing.

I stretched my neck back, straining my eyes against the darkness and the elements. Where had she come from? On the third storey a tiny wrought-iron balcony extended from the brickwork. I got to my feet, my hair hanging in wet ropes across my face. I could do nothing for her. If she was still alive she would drown if she stayed here. I was wasting time. She needed an ambulance. I took four paces to the front door and rapped on it, then kept my finger pressed on the doorbell, just one anonymous doorbell, so not a flat, the whole house occupied by one family or one person, perhaps the one person who lay shattered on the ground behind me. Yet even as the thought occurred to me I knew it was not the case, knew

I'd seen other people letting themselves in at this door. A well-dressed man, grungy teenagers, these were the images that came to mind. No one, however, came to the door.

The noise of the rain, like waves slamming against a shoreline, meant I could not hear whether there was movement inside the house. I took a step back. There was only one light on in the house as far as I could see, and that was in the third-floor room with the balcony. I stepped back further, and I could see now that there were French windows opening out, and that drapes of some light fabric had been lifted by the wind and were blowing into the night. I banged on the door again, shouted, then gave up. I turned back towards my house, making for the nearest telephone, then stopped dead in my tracks. My front door had blown shut. Hannah and William were inside. My hands went to my head, clutching great handfuls of sopping hair.

'Shit, shit, shit,' I heard myself shout.

I had left them safe in bed, of course, but at that moment, in the face of sudden death, neither fire nor earthquake seemed impossible or even unlikely. I vaulted the brick wall between the house and its neighbour, the house with the pale blue walls. I hammered on the door with one hand while I pressed the bell with the other. For a moment I thought I heard footsteps, but then nothing. No one. I could have sworn someone was on the other side of the door.

'Please open the door,' I shouted. 'I need your help.'

Still nothing.

'It's an emergency,' I yelled.

I gave up, climbed over the fence into the next pathway, pounded on that door with the same results, gave up, clambered over a low hedge, tried again. There were three bells here, three flats. I pressed all three with my palm, kept pressing and thumping at the door, my fist numb. All of a sudden this door opened and a young man peered out, outraged at my invasion. We had passed each other in the street, never so much as nodded at each other. Tall and athletic, with cropped hair, he was dressed in a short raincoat, carrying an umbrella, dry as a bone, getting ready to venture out and get soaked.

**'For Christ's sake, what -?' He took in my bedraggled state, my crazed eyes, and I saw him want to close the door in my face. But he didn't. Anyway I wasn't going to let him. I was half inside already.**

**'Your phone,' I gasped, dripping all over this threshold. I have to phone for an ambulance.'**

**He let me shove past him and stood awkwardly, hands pushed angrily into his pockets, while I grabbed the phone on the hall table and dialed 999. All the time I spoke to the emergency services, telling them about the woman who had fallen, and about my house locked with my children inside, I was looking at him, needing him to understand too and to help me. He had the sense to keep quiet, anyway, while I spoke. The anger lifted from his face as he listened, and the expression was replaced by one of shock. By the time I'd given my address, he was heading out into the rain, leaving me alone in his hallway.**

**I hung up, then looked around me. How long would it take them to get here? I couldn't wait. There was nothing but the hall table, a spindly antique affair about a foot square, no room for anything but the telephone, which I tipped onto the floor. I lifted the table, liking the look of its long legs, and ran back across the road with my loot. The man had stopped by the woman, bending over her. I didn't stop to see what he was doing. I stepped over my front wall and swung the table at the window, holding it by its legs, leaving the wooden edge of the tabletop to do its demolition work and turning my face away as the glass shattered. I bashed around a bit more to get rid of the shards of glass, then dropped what was left of the table. It was more delicate than I thought, and it hadn't fared well. I pulled off my sweater and wrapped it around my hands for protection, then pulled myself carefully over the sill and into my sitting room. I pounded up the stairs and into the tiny room which was the twins' bedroom. Inside all was quiet, two cotton-suited bottoms stuck in the air, faces half-hidden in the mattress, lips working, dreaming of sucking.**

**I stood there for a minute just looking down at them, catching my breath. So peaceful. I had an overwhelming desire to stay here and stand guard over them. Outside I heard sirens approaching. I turned and left the room. I ran back down the**

stairs, grabbed my keys from the kitchen table and, just to make double sure, wedged open my front door with a copy of the *Guardian*.

The street was full of flashing blue lights. Not only that: this street, abandoned as a ghost town when I had needed help, when I had shouted and yelled for help, was now as populated as a rush-hour station. Faces peered from windows and from behind half-open front doors. The more adventurous had grabbed some sort of protective clothing and made their way into the street, where they stood in ones and twos, not really knowing how to talk to each other, not wanting to be involved, curious nevertheless and therefore conversing. How to form a community, I thought. Kill one of them.

Suddenly the door of the house from which the woman had fallen burst open. A slight figure raced from it and before anyone could move, hurled itself on the woman's body. An animal cry rose in to the night sky and my blood ran cold. The small figure, scarcely more than a child, was hugging the limp flesh, burying his face in her wet hair, for all the world as though he was trying to breathe life back. Then the police and paramedics closed in, forcing the boy away, protecting what could no longer be protected. He tried to fight them off, pint-sized fists pummeling the living bodies that dragged him tenderly from the dead, and the rain hissed down, drowning his shrieks and drenching us all.

\*

Later that night, when the body and the boy had both gone, a young woman, DC Mann, took my statement. She had stamina, and I fed her stamina on cups of tea. She tried every way she knew to stir my memory, to search it for the thing I did not even know I knew, for the elusive glimpse of the unusual, the out of place, the clue. I was pleased by her doggedness because I needed to have what I had seen examined and re-examined. I needed to repeat it aloud, and to someone other than myself. I needed to have it recorded.

From my work I know that what is remembered as the truth may be only a version of the truth, so I knew I would return to this record that DC Mann produced to check and retune my memory in the days to come. By the early hours of the morning my statement was a marvel of description on everything from the state of the weather to the exact angle at which the woman had fallen, the altitude at which I had first spotted the body falling, the degree of lifelessness with which the woman's body had lain broken on the saturated ground.

I recited to DC Mann what I could remember of the screamed argument earlier in the evening. It was strange to sit there in my kitchen in the midnight silence and calmly recite the words 'whore' and 'bitch'. I told her I had no idea which house the argument came from, no idea whether it had anything at all to do with the woman's death that came later. I was telling her about the argument only because she wanted to know about the whole evening, from beginning to end. Then I hesitated. When she pressed me to say what was on my mind, I told her that I thought I had heard voices again just before the woman had fallen, but that – and this I stressed – could have been sheer fancy. This time there were no words to give her, no splinters of sentences, just my impression that I had heard voices mixed with the noise of the storm. She did not like using words like 'impression' in the statement, wanted me to firm it up, but I could not. I ended up wishing I hadn't even mentioned it.

The woman, she said, had not yet been formally identified, but I learnt the name of the family who lived at the house from which she had fallen. The house belonged, she said, to the Carmichaels. I told her the name meant nothing to me. I read my statement and reread it. My words had been transformed into police language. I would not myself have chosen to describe the woman who died as 'Caucasian female, middle-aged, wearing light-coloured nightdress'. Just as I would not, in my first breath of description, have described DC Mann as black, although she was. The statement simply did not sound like me, yet nothing that Mann had written was inaccurate. I signed every page, scratching lines through the empty space at the bottom of the last page so that nothing could be added. Every detail was



**there, but nothing I had witnessed was the slightest clue to the heart of the matter:  
why this woman had fallen and how.**