

# Blue Tide Rising

Clare Stevens



PART ONE

# Balmoral Street

## Chapter One

“THERE SHE GOES. Likkle Pixie in har big coat.” The Man stands by his railing where he waits, when it’s dry, watching the world. I force a smile out from under my hood.

“Ah she smiling now,” he says. “A smile from Pixie-girl goes a laang way.”

I scurry on by.

My route to Lidl takes me beyond Balmoral Street onto the main road, past the corner where two girls are out. Past the bookies, the boarded-up pubs and the bright, brash, payday loan shops. Past the old Post Office, its windows plastered with faded posters, signs of a battle to keep it open, lost long ago. Past the Methodist Mission, with its giant poster telling everyone to ‘Keep calm and follow Jesus’. There are people outside there, handing out leaflets. I keep my head down, hood up and hands deep in my pockets. It starts to rain again.

There’s a song playing on repeat in my head. A Smiths song from the 80s about rain and Manchester. It’s been in my head for weeks, the soundtrack to my life. As it plays on I curse the fact that all my earworms still come from the Iain Carver period of my past.

People don't choose to come to Balmoral Street. It's not listed in the student literature or the brochures they give to tourists. People fetch up here like flotsam. That's what happened to me. I washed up here after I lost the baby – precisely how that happened is hidden in a Diazepam haze. I guess I fit right in among all the other misfits. Immigrants arriving from warzones around the world. Girls, younger than me, working the street corner, shivering in bare legs. Kids looking for gear, or cigarettes, or change. The social worker calls them 'hard to reach.' Hard to avoid, more like.

"You look down you see shit, you look up, you see de sky," The Man told me. Most people here look down, me included.

When I get back, he is talking to another black man, someone whose clothes don't fit the weather. Someone with that guarded, hunted look of the new arrivals. They live in the houses no-one else wants. Barrel Woman says they should go home, but I reckon it must be bad where they come from if they think this is the promised land.

"He from Somalia," The Man says. Isn't that where the pirates come from? Do I want people like that living near me? But the immigrants are mostly ok, keeping to themselves. It's the spice-heads and pimps and other crazy characters who are the problem.

I nod at the two men and turn towards my building, but The Man calls me back. "Somebody looking for you," he says.

I feel a jolt of something shoot through my veins. Something that makes me stop, makes me swing round to face him, makes me speak.

"Who?"

"Young mon."

Young? Not Iain then, although it's just possible that to The Man, even Iain might seem young.

"Tall," he holds his hand up above his head to indicate someone at least six foot tall.

Definitely not Iain.

“Very fair. Slim.”

Not Howard Carlotti either.

“Dreamy boy. I seen him around here before. But not for a  
laang time.”

Who the...?

## Chapter Two

“BITCH.”

Psycho-Boy sits on the stairs, blocking the route to my attic.

“What da fuck. DA FUCK!” He’s shouting at someone who isn’t there. I cower on the landing, just out of sight, pulse racing. Somehow I have to get past him.

“Fucking BITCH!”

I prefer it when he’s comatose. I can step over him then.

I tap on Barrel Woman’s door. No answer. I brace myself, working up the courage to appear in Psycho-Boy’s line of sight. He has one tree-trunk leg splayed out to the side, one stretched in front of him. His hairy belly folds out over his jeans. He smells, as usual, of weed and piss. He doesn’t flinch as I appear, doesn’t seem to notice me. I size up the situation. He’s taking up most of the stairway, but I might just be able to squeeze past. I breathe in, as if that will make me even thinner, then make my move. He looks up through unfocused eyes and bats his hand in front of his face like he’s swiping at a fly, then carries on muttering. I make it.

Psycho-Boy lives in the flat below me. Whatever he's on makes him shout a lot. He's a white boy who talks like a black boy and plays hip-hop loud and late. He has visitors through the day and night, and if they can't get in downstairs they throw things at his window. Their aim isn't always that good; once they cracked Barrel Woman's glass. His presence doesn't help my stress levels, especially now, with him blocking the stairs. I reach for the Diazepam, and dive under the duvet.

I don't know what time it is when I surface. Here, day and night merge into a perpetual grey – the window in the roof lets in too much light at night and not enough in the daytime. I'm in the in-between state between sleep and consciousness, half-woken by a hint of outdoors air, like someone's left a door or window open. That's when I notice someone standing at the foot of my bed. An indistinct figure, shrouded in a large Parka. Dream? Or real? Hard to tell, these days. I have no energy to think about him. He doesn't look dangerous. In any case, I've got nothing left to lose.

When I wake again the figure is still there and the smell of the outdoors is stronger. It reminds me of something. Pieces of the past float through my mind. Stanlow on a summer evening, the fishermen's nook down by the river, me and Iain cocooned in our secret love, out of sight, while across the water shouts went out from the party people on the green and the band played on.

But it's not quite that, this aroma. It's something else. Maybe even... but I can't go there. It's locked away. Unreachable.

The figure gets nearer, and clearer, as he moves into the patch of light below the window. I can now see his face. Young, wide, pale, with big intense eyes, brown, I think, and even in the gloom I can see the lightness of his hair. Most of the faces you see around here are ugly. They show the ravages of chaotic lives. This one is gorgeous. Maybe that's why I let my eyes rest on it and do not banish it from my bedroom. There's something almost familiar

about the face. Has he been here before, in this room? Is he here every night? Perhaps I saw him at the hospital. Sometimes I think I'm back there. There were plenty of strangers around me then, but surely, none this beautiful. He could even be a girl. I can't make out his shape underneath the Parka, but sense he is insubstantial.

“Amy.”

He knows my name.



## Chapter Three

“WHO ARE YOU?” my voice sounds strange and laboured. “Me?” he says, shrugging slightly, as though his identity isn’t important. “They call me Jay.”

His voice, rich and deep, contrasts with the androgyny of his face.

He stands, hands in the pockets of his Parka, and looks around him. “Hasn’t changed much,” he says. “I used to live in this room.”

“When?” I feel a stab of fear. Has he come to reclaim his room? I sit upright, now wide awake. The slats in the headboard dig into my back.

“A few years ago, but don’t worry, I’ve no desire to move back in again.”

It’s like he’s read my mind.

“So how come you’re here now?” I say.

“I thought maybe you could use someone to talk to.”

I rack my fuddled brain for some explanation, some category to put him in. Not an addict – they find their way up here sometimes looking for money or stuff to nick. Not another resident – they do

the same. Since the break-in, when someone forced the lock on my door, all it takes is a light shove to gain entry to the room.

Then I remember something the social worker said months ago, or it might have been the psychiatrist. What did they call it? Mentoring, befriending? Some meaningless social-worker bullshit.

“Did someone send you?” I say, pulling the pillow behind my back. “They said they were sending some random person round to see me.”

He chuckles, perching himself on the table near my bed. “Random. That’ll be me.”

“But I don’t want to see anyone,” I say, tired of the new demands speaking is making of me. “I just want to sleep.”

“And can you sleep?” he says. “You seem to spend a lot of time in bed, but I’m not sure you sleep.”

I shrug. “No. Not really. And when I do I have weird dreams.”

He stares straight at me, like he’s actually interested in what I’m saying. “What are your weird dreams about?”

It’s none of his business, of course, but something makes me want to keep him there.

“There’s like a line of faces, and I have to walk along the line, and they’re all looming out of the walls at me. They’re people I used to know, then they morph into monsters.”

“Hmm,” he says. “Recognition. That’s what that’s about. No longer recognising yourself or others. You feel betrayed. Am I right?”

“You a shrink or something? You interpret dreams?”

“Something must have happened to turn everything ugly,” he says.

“Everything *is* ugly,” I say.

He moves away then, into the shadows near the door.

“I have to go now, Amy, but listen, I’m glad we made contact. I’ll call by another time, if it’s all right with you? Probably after Christmas.”

“Whatever,” I say, sinking back into slumber.

I wake to see a thin shaft of daylight breaking through the grey. He is gone.

## Chapter Four

I DON'T KNOW what day it is when I venture out. I wonder why the streets are so quiet. I've been conscious of the build-up, of course – tinsel hanging outside Speedy Cash, carols floating out from the Methodist Mission, Christmas songs from the one remaining pub. The temporary fireworks shop has morphed into a temporary Christmas shop. Someone has even hung a few lights on the section of road between Ladbrokes and the pharmacist.

The debris of the season lies all around. Soggy wrapping paper, discarded tinsel, bottles on the street, more vomit than usual. I walk all the way to Lidl to find it shut. I'll have to make do with something from the corner shop.

On my way back I see The Man striding down the street. Very rare to see him away from his post. He looks smart, in a brown overcoat. He's wearing his Trilby. He reminds me of my granddad dressed for Sunday.

"Here she is on Christmas day." He says, holding his arms out wide. I tense up, in case he's going to hug me, but he sidesteps then continues on his way. He must have somewhere to go.

“Merry Christmas luv,” a man swigging from a can of extra strong lager and trailing a length of purple tinsel lurches towards me. I duck.

Coming back over the threshold of the house, I see Psycho-Boy, crashed out in the hall, a pair of antlers round his neck.

“So this is Christmas!” I say to myself as I step over him.

Later, I hear a familiar footfall on the attic stairs, and the wheezing of someone with bad lungs hauling themselves up to my landing. I open the door to Barrel Woman, her face smeared with glitter, a pair of flashing Santa earrings setting off her usual stretch leggings and outsize jumper dress. Black and orange stripes today. She looks like a bee. The pink dye she put in her hair a couple of months ago has mostly grown out and she’s back to grey, with flecks of glitter that glint like dandruff.

“Merry Christmas gel!” she thrusts a bottle of Tesco Finest blended whiskey at me.

Barrel Woman’s real name is Mary, and she comes from London, which she calls ‘Landin’. For her, Balmoral Street is a step up; she’s spent a lot of her life in institutions. “I booked meself in for the winter, back in 89, but they wouldn’t let me out so I escaped, got on a National Express up to Manchester and I bin ’ere ever since.” Barrel Woman has done drugs with Amy Winehouse, gone on drink binges with George Best and hung out with the Beatles. I’ve no idea how old she is. She’s the closest thing I have around here to a friend.

Today we dine on pizza and baked beans, and she dines out on tales of life on the streets and celebrities she’s known. We sing along to TOTP2, using the ketchup bottle as a microphone. She produces a pack of cards and teaches me to play Blind Don. I don’t smoke, but I have five of her cut-price cigarettes that afternoon. At some point in the proceedings, we go out to the corner shop and buy two-for-one bottles of QC. The rest is oblivion.

On Boxing Day I wake up with the mother of all hangovers and resolve not to entertain Barrel Woman for a very long time.