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Friends and Enemies

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London W1F 8AN
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2019.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2411-6

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter One

Poplar, London, March 1941

‘Here they come again.’ Katherine Hammond’s mother picked up the bag containing a thermos flask and sandwiches ready for another long night in the shelter. ‘Put on something warm, Kathy. It’s a cold night.’

Winding a scarf around her neck and slipping on gloves, she followed her mother the short distance along the road to the shelter. It would be lovely to sleep undisturbed in her own bed, but her mother always insisted they took cover when the air raid sirens sounded.

The shelter was filling up as the drone of bombers approaching could be heard. Making sure her mother was well inside, she took a seat right by the door. Everyone was talking, and it wouldn’t be long before a sing-song started. It was always the same and the singing helped to comfort people, especially the children. The whistle of bombs falling could already be heard above the noise of chatter. They sounded close.

A man arrived late and sat opposite them. ‘Looks like they’ve picked us tonight. They are right overhead and there are hundreds of the buggers.’

An explosion shook the shelter, making cement dust fall from the roof. Then almost immediately there was another crash, and Kathy was flying through the air. She hit the ground with a force that knocked all the breath out of her, and for a while she was confused, not able to grasp why she was in the road covered in dust and debris. There was an eerie quietness, which was broken all of a sudden by people running and shouting.

‘This one’s alive!’ someone called out.

‘Can you move?’

Kathy looked up at the man bending over her and struggled to sit up, glancing at the devastation surrounding her. Then the realisation hit her. The shelter was no longer there. Surging to her feet, she shook off the man’s restraining hand and lurched to where the shelter had been. Then she fell onto her hands and knees, and began to pull at the rubble, frantic now.

The man was beside her again. ‘Come away, miss. There’s nothing you can do here.’

‘My mother’s in there,’ she shouted at him. ‘I’ve got to find her.’

‘Where was she sitting?’ he asked, helping by pulling away some of the larger pieces.

‘About here. I think it’s about here. Help me!’

The next two hours were a nightmare as body after body was pulled from the debris, and she inspected every one in the desperate need to find her mother.

She was finally found, and Kathy knelt beside her, knowing instantly that she was dead. After finding out where they were taking the dead, she stood up and tried to take a step forward, but for some reason her body wasn’t obeying the command.

‘You’d better go to the hospital,’ a warden told her. ‘You’re in shock and need medical help.’

Kathy shook her head. ‘They have enough to do this night, and I must find my aunt.’

‘The all-clear hasn’t sounded yet. You should take cover.’

She gave him a pitying look and pointed to the rubble. ‘I did take cover – in that!’

‘I’m sorry. It’s a bad night.’

‘Bad?’ Anger raced through her like a wildfire out of control and she looked up at the sky, illuminated by the many fires burning all around. ‘Tell that to those bloody men up there. My mother never hurt anyone in her life and now she’s dead. None of the people in there deserved to die like this. It’s senseless murder!’

‘If you won’t take cover, go home and try to get some rest.’

Her laugh was almost hysterical as she pointed along the road. ‘That great hole is where my home used to be.’

The man swore as she turned, finally able to make herself move away from the devastation that had just torn her life apart.

On her way to her aunt’s house Kathy scrambled over the rubble, dazed and oblivious to the chaos and noise. What was going on around her meant nothing at this moment. She was not even aware of the drone of aeroplanes and the whistle of bombs as they hurtled down.

‘You can’t go down there, miss.’

She glanced at the air raid warden holding her arm. ‘My aunt lives there.’

‘I’m sorry, but that row of houses took a direct hit. What are you doing wandering around here? The all-clear hasn’t sounded yet. You should be in a shelter.’

‘I was. That was hit as well.’ Kathy gazed at the devastation around her, unable to put into words what had happened to her. ‘Have they found any survivors in there?’

‘Not yet, but your aunt might be in one of the centres set up, or in a shelter.’

She shook her head. ‘No, she always said she was going to sleep in her own bed, no matter what.’

‘Well, we won’t know if anyone has survived for a while yet, so why don’t you go home and try to get some sleep. Dawn isn’t far away, and this raid can’t go on much longer now.’

‘My house isn’t there any more.’

The warden sighed wearily. ‘You’d better go to one of the centres, lass. Where’s the rest of your family?’

‘My dad’s in the navy . . .’ With a massive effort Kathy dredged up the words she had been trying to deny. ‘There’s only my mum and she was just killed when the shelter blew apart.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, lass. Go to the hall along the road and get some help. You look as if you need it. You’re in a terrible mess.’

Kathy turned and stumbled back the way she had come. When the road was reasonably passable she stood up straight and paused, trying to clear her head so she could think straight. She was lost, not knowing what to do or where to go. In one vicious night her world had been torn from under her feet and there was an emptiness inside her that was like a black void.

Another loud explosion jolted her, and the void was filled with raging anger, blanking out all other emotions. All grief and horror were instantly trampled underfoot, leaving behind a fury that man should unleash such cruelty on its own kind.

With fists clenched she straightened up. Well, if that's the way it was going to be, then she wasn't going to let them get away with this. Somehow, she would make them pay for this night, and all the other nights when people had suffered and died. They wanted a fight and they would bloody well get one. For the first time in her life Kathy regretted being a girl and so unable to join a fighting unit, but she would find a way to get involved in the fight!

'Come inside, dearie, you look as if you need a strong cup of tea and someone to deal with your injuries. Then we'll find you some clothes. Yours are torn to shreds.'

'Are they? I hadn't noticed.' Kathy looked at the woman who had taken her arm and allowed her to lead her into the church hall. It was packed, mostly with women and children, as the men were out there frantically digging in the rubble in the hope of finding anyone alive. There were a couple of nurses and a man who was clearly a doctor, dealing with the injured, and women from the Women's Voluntary Service giving tea and comfort to as many as they could. Kathy noticed the various expressions on the faces of those inside: stunned, sadness, grief and, on many, anger. Oh yes, she thought, this madness would be avenged! The appalling thing was this country was going to have to meet like with like if it was going to survive. It was now a case of fighting or going under, and that was unthinkable.

'Let me have a look at your injuries, miss.'

'Hmm?'

'I'm a doctor, and you've got blood on your clothes, face and hands. I need to dress your injuries.'

Kathy looked down at herself and noticed the mess she was in for the first time. 'I'm all right.'

‘Let me be the judge of that.’ He took hold of her arm to lead her into another room that had been set up to tend to the injured.

She shook his hand off. ‘I said I’m all right!’

‘Don’t waste my time, young lady. I have plenty of other people who need my help.’

He spoke softly, although was clearly irritated by her attitude, and when Kathy looked into his eyes she saw the strain he had been under during this long night. ‘I apologise, Doctor, but at the moment I am so angry, and I am sure the blood on me isn’t mine. Please see to your other patients while I try to calm my thoughts and gain some kind of control over what has happened.’

He inclined his head. ‘That is something we are all struggling with at the moment, but don’t leave here without seeing me. I do believe you have injuries that need attention.’

Kathy watched him walk away, knowing the strain all the rescue workers were under. She mustn’t vent her fury on any of them, or anyone here. They weren’t to blame for this senseless carnage.

‘She’s in shock,’ Kathy heard the doctor tell someone. ‘Keep an eye on her and call me if she needs help.’

‘I’ll do that, Doctor.’

Kathy gazed around the crowded room and studied the faces. A few were shedding quiet tears and she knew it was something she should be doing but supposed that would come later when the numbness wore off. It was as if her mind had switched off and was refusing to look at the horror she had just experienced. The anger that was surging through her had obliterated all other emotions.

‘Come and wash your face and hands, dear, and then we will find you a nice strong cup of tea and a sandwich.’ The woman who appeared at her side looked bone-weary, but still managed a faint smile. ‘My name’s Doris. What’s yours?’

‘Kathy.’

‘Come with me, Kathy, and let’s get you cleaned up, shall we?’

She nodded and allowed Doris to take her to a small bathroom.

‘We’re lucky because we’ve still got water here. The firemen managed to get it flowing again for us. The doctors need it, you see, and so do they.’ She chatted away while she put water in the sink.

As Kathy placed her hands in the sink the water turned pink and she shuddered violently.

‘Easy, my dear. You’ll feel better when you get that off you.’ Doris wet a cloth and wiped the mess from Kathy’s face when she was trembling too much to do it for herself. ‘There, that’s better. I’ll see if I can find you some clothes. People have been generous bringing in all kinds of things we might need, so we should be able to find you something.’

‘Thank you.’ Kathy grabbed hold of the sink for support. The sight of blood colouring the water had brought back the full horror of what had happened, and she knew where the blood had come from. She had tried to revive her mother although she had known she was dead, and that picture had caused her to nearly fall apart. That was something she wasn’t going to do, she vowed, and gathered the rage around her again like a blanket of protection.

Back in the hall with a cup of tea and a slice of bread with a thin spread of something on it, she struggled to

think clearly. After a tremendous inner fight, control came, and the cup was steady in her hand. Kathy nibbled on the bread, grateful for the small victory. Somehow, she had to get through this night and the days to come. She didn't seriously expect her aunt had survived a direct hit, and she would have to deal with the aftermath of this night. Her father was at sea, so she was alone, without any family or even a home to return to.

'Where were you, dear?' Doris asked gently.

'In the shelter on the corner of Benson Street. It was bombed.'

'How many survived?'

'A few.'

'Were you with anyone?'

Her mouth set in a grim line as she glared at the woman, rage flashing in her dark eyes, but she managed to bite back the sharp reply of telling her to mind her own business. 'I thank you for your kindness, but I'm all right now, and there are many more people who need your help.'

'I understand you don't want to talk about it, dear.' Doris stood up and patted her shoulder. 'You call if you need anything.'

Kathy didn't know how long she sat there, or what was happening around her. It was as if a film was running in her head, showing herself and many others digging in the rubble, and as each of the dead was brought out she could see their faces clearly. When she became aware of someone's hands on her she pushed them away.

'Don't you think she should be in hospital, Doctor?' she heard a woman ask.

'They are already overcrowded, and as far as I can see she isn't injured. She's in shock, so we'll keep her here until she comes out of it. I see you've managed to change

her clothes, but has she had anything to drink and eat?’

‘Yes, we gave her a strong cup of tea and a slice of bread, and her cup and plate are empty.’

‘Good. We must see if we can get her to talk. It might help.’

The woman sighed deeply. ‘What a terrible night. So much pain, loss and suffering. Goodness knows what this girl has seen. When we changed her clothes, we saw that none of the blood on her was hers.’

‘By the look of her torn fingernails I would say she has been digging in the rubble looking for someone.’

Someone grasped her hands tightly and demanded in a firm tone, ‘Look at me!’

Kathy raised her head and looked into a face drawn with fatigue, but the blue eyes were still clear and alert.

‘Tell me who you are and what happened to you.’

Such a kind face, she thought, as she formed the words, ‘Kathy Hammond.’

‘And where were you during the raid?’ he prompted, still gripping her hands firmly.

‘In a shelter. It blew up.’

‘Were you on your own?’

She shook her head and looked away.

‘Tell me who you were with. Were they family?’ He gently turned her head back to look at him again. ‘Don’t keep it all inside, Kathy. All the hurt and grief has got to be released. Talk to me.’

Suddenly, fury erupted. ‘What the hell do you think happened on a night like this? Everyone was in that shelter for safety, and those devils blew it up. There were children in there – and my mother.’ Her tone was bitter. ‘I tried to help, but it was no use. My home was also just a pile of rubble, so

I came here to find my aunt. Her house has been flattened as well, and they haven't found anyone alive yet.'

'Do you have any other family you can go to?'

'There's only my dad now, and he's in the navy.' Kathy could hear herself saying these things, but it seemed as if she was talking about someone else.

The doctor unwound himself from his crouched position in front of her, his expression grim. 'Stay here tonight and see what the situation is in the morning. You'll have to sleep on the floor, but we've managed to get some blankets. I'll be here if you need me.'

She looked up at the weary face and reached out in compassion. 'You need rest, Doctor. We are in a world gone crazy and you can't save everyone.'

'Maybe not.' He shrugged. 'But I can have a damned good try.'

Kathy watched him walk away to see what he could do for more people. There was activity all around her. Women were doing their best to supply survivors and rescuers with tea and sandwiches. A baker had just arrived from somewhere with loaves of bread; someone else was bringing in milk and other supplies. Others were hauling in bedding for those who had lost their homes, and there was even an elderly man entertaining the frightened children with card tricks and, miraculously, bringing smiles to their faces. It was an astonishing scene, and one she knew she would never forget.

Rising quickly to her feet she marched over to a group of WVS women who were making sandwiches as fast as they could. 'Give me something to do,' she demanded.

The woman who was clearly in charge nodded, picked up a tray full of mugs and handed it to her. 'Take that to the

men outside and tell them there's food here for them when they can take a break. And thanks, dear, we need all the help we can get tonight.'

Someone opened the door for her and she stepped into something resembling Dante's 'Inferno'. The destruction was shocking and the fires from the docks had turned the sky a bright orange. The planes were no longer overhead, but they could be heard as they wreaked havoc in another area of London. There were people everywhere, men, women, some in uniform and many in ordinary clothes, but all were tearing at the rubble in a desperate effort to find anyone buried there. As Kathy gazed at the horrific scene she was certain that it was something she would never be able to forgive.

'That for us, lass?' There was a brief flash of white teeth in the grime-covered face.

'Yes, and there's food inside when you're ready.'

'Thanks.' He gazed at the devastation all around them and beckoned to others to come and get the tea. 'It will be a while, though.'

The tray was quickly emptied by weary and thirsty rescuers. 'I'll get some more. Have you found anyone alive where that house was?' She pointed to the large hole where her aunt's house had stood.

'We've found two people, but they were dead, I'm sorry to say.' He sighed deeply. 'Was that your home?'

Kathy shook her head. 'That was my aunt's house. Mine was in the next street – and that's gone as well.'

'Ah, I'm sorry.'

'I'll get more tea,' she said quickly. The last thing she wanted was sympathy. She was only holding herself together with anger, and that was hanging by a slender thread. If she let

that go she didn't know what would happen to her. Everyone around her was suffering in some way or another, and help was needed, not hysterical females making the rescuers' job even more distressing. Kathy gritted her teeth as she made her way back to the hall, determined to stay strong if she could. At the back of her mind she knew this was important if she was going to function well enough to cope with the aftermath of this raid.

She continued to do anything asked of her, and when dawn arrived the rescuers were still everywhere. Exhausted firemen, police, medical staff, military and civilians were sitting on rubble or propped up against anything they could find to support them.

'We've run out of everything,' Betty, one of the WVS women said, coming to stand beside Kathy. 'We've appealed for more and we are going to need it, because these poor devils won't get any rest today.'

'Neither will you or anyone else, and tonight it will all start again.' Kathy fought to keep the tears from her eyes. 'How can anyone do this to innocent people?'

'It's all-out war, dear, and they are trying to break our spirit.' Betty gave a strained smile. 'That won't happen. Just look around you. People are picking their way around the mess in an effort to get to work, and there's even a bus running. We aren't beaten yet!'

Kathy couldn't believe her eyes. People were clambering on the bus and many others were walking, determined to get to work any way they could. She brushed the dust from her clothes. 'I must go as well.'

'Where do you work, dear?'

'Cartwright's, an engineering firm near the docks.'

‘Cartwright’s, you say?’ A fireman had overheard her and was shaking his head. ‘I was there during the raid and it’s burnt to the ground. No point you going down there, because the whole area is unsafe and fires are still burning.’

Kathy nodded and took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind. There was a funeral to arrange – two if she could find out what had happened to her aunt. Then there was the problem of somewhere to stay, and a decision had to be made about what she was going to do. It was a struggle to grasp the situation she was now facing. In one night, she had lost everything – her mother, almost certainly her aunt, her home and job. All she had were the clothes she stood up in, and even those had been given to her. The list of things to do was daunting, but she was the only one left who could sort everything out, so she had better get on with it. Her first task would be to find lodgings of some sort, then tackle the other distressing things, and she sincerely hoped the meagre amount of her savings in the bank would pay for everything.

Her mind was spinning, threatening to throw her into confusion, but she recognised the feelings as shock, and balled her hands into fists, knowing she must keep functioning. Another thing missing when the shelter blew apart was her handbag containing all her personal details, so that was something else she had better sort out.

It was going to be one of the toughest days she had ever faced!