

## Chapter 1

### Gerard & Rose - Thursday

“Rose, Rose! Come here!” Gerard called to her from his usual spot at the window seat in the living room.

Rose hurried back to him, carrying a tray laden with a freshly-filled tea pot, two mugs and the biscuit tin. “What is it, are you OK?” It was unlike her husband, Gerard, to ever call her from another room; he much preferred to walk to where she was and speak to her ‘at a reasonable volume, like a gentleman should’.

“Has something happened? Are we going to war?” Rose asked, worried.

“What?!” Gerard asked, confused for a moment. “Oh love, no, but look!” He jabbed his finger at the newspaper he had been reading and was now holding up for her to see.

“Look! It’s her!” he said excitedly.

Rose leaned in to take a closer look at the photo he was pointing to in the paper. It was no good. “Hang on, I need my glasses,” she said, leaving to get her rose-framed, cat eye glasses from the kitchen.

Once back and bespectacled, she took another look and saw a familiar woman looking back at her from the paper. Taking it from her husband, she peered more closely at the picture. Now where did she know her from?

Seeing that Rose hadn’t twigged who the picture was of, Gerard prompted, “See the hair? Perfectly groomed, shiny, long and brown?” She looked at him quizzically. *Was it Karen’s daughter?* It was no use, she wasn’t sure; she shrugged her shoulders to prompt Gerard’s answer.

“Well, she’s not got her red coat on, but I thought it was obvious,” Gerard said, smiling and giving it away in one. Rose gasped; now she knew who it was. In her defence, she thought, she’d never seen the woman close-up before and certainly never without her trusty, smart red coat.

Gerard continued, “She’s missing, they’re looking for her.”

They had noticed that the woman, who usually passed by like clockwork, hadn’t gone by since Monday, not appearing on Tuesday or Wednesday. They would usually see her walking down the footpath, between the two blocks of low-rise flats, every weekday promptly at 6:15 pm.

When this hadn’t happened on Tuesday, the development had been highly unusual and, as such, had been a talking point for them. They couldn’t recall any weekday when this had ever happened in the past, and they’d lived in the flat for four years!

After a year of the woman going past, Rose had even questioned the bizarre unrelenting consistency of it. “Doesn’t she ever take holidays? Or feel poorly? Or have something better to do! Poor dear, probably needs a break!”

There had, of course, been days when the couple hadn’t been at home to see the woman go by. Gerard and Rose either holidaying themselves or – more typically – seeing family, but those days were rare, as Rose was always keen to be back before dark. Yet, despite this, they remained completely certain the woman had still followed her routine and walked past the flats on those days at 6:15pm. Until now.

They hadn’t ever actively been watching for her, they certainly weren’t stalkers, but sitting in the flat’s window seat together each day meant they would see her go by below, along with the other users of the footpath.

Both having retired before moving to the flat, Gerard and Rose's time was typically spent working on their hobbies (modelling and crafting, respectively) or sitting together in the window seat. From this favoured spot, they'd watch the world go by over a cup of tea or read side-by-side, Rose with her nose in a mystery novel and Gerard reading the paper or a modelling magazine.

Although content and still enjoying their time together, they had both previously admitted during a heart-to-heart one dreary January day to finding the repeated pattern somewhat dull and boring. Their lives were very different from their busy working ones before. After re-reviewing their finances at the time, however, they had agreed they still needed to stick with their carefully budgeted-out pensions, which allowed for very few holidays and days out, in case money might be needed down-the-line for health care, replacement appliances or increased heating costs.

So, instead, to add some entertainment to their days and provide a source of conversation, they would often make-up stories together about the people they saw passing by. The missing woman had been a regular feature.

Their stories would alternate between laughably absurd ("She's a top spy for the MI6, keeping an eye on Anil Thistlewaite below us. I knew he was hiding something! I bet she's cracked the case!") to potentially real theories based on careful guess work. Rose, who fancied herself a Miss Marple, enjoyed looking out for clues and would consider any facts she'd managed to find out, when dreaming up her stories.

Quite often the woman was deemed, by the pair of them, to be a TV presenter. They'd never seen her on TV but often expected to, thanks to her glamorous and smart appearance. This also suggested, they believed, that she earned a good wage.

They had deduced that she was walking home from her place of work each day; it being in the evening and comfortably after they had eaten their tea. They had also noted they didn't see her go by in the mornings, despite Rose being an early-riser, so had concluded that she walked a circuit to work each day; going there one way (likely through the park, which was probably a bit longer but much prettier) and returning home the faster, more direct way, past the flats. They suspected she might live on the new fancy estate, situated a little further out of town.

In their stories, she'd had many names: Aimee ("She's probably French, hence the glamour" – Gerard), Lucky, Belle ("Meaning one of great beauty" – Rose), and more.

But today, this woman was unexpectedly featured in their local paper. Rose sat down by her husband and studied the photo, taking in the woman's piercing blue eyes and fine nose. She'd not been able to make out her features before, from their window on the second floor, but could see enough to know she was attractive, if not beautiful, and always smartly dressed.

Rose could picture the woman walking along quite clearly in her mind; her red coat would be buttoned up, with a belt pulled tight at the waist and knotted at the front. The bottom of the coat flared out slightly, emphasising her hourglass figure. The woman's brunette hair would flow out behind her as she walked, always looking silky and glossy.

Rose sighed, feeling sad that the woman was now 'missing'; it didn't sound like a story likely to have a happy ending. The world could seem so ghastly at times.

Turning her attention to the article, Rose learned that the woman's name was, in fact, Elize Dukes. She considered what a sad way it was to learn of this fact.

“Elize,” she said aloud, attaching this new detail to the image of the woman in her head. “That’s a different name. Pretty, like her.” Gerard nodded his agreement.

It turned out Elize had a family and husband. Rose wasn’t sure if by ‘family’, the journalist meant she had children or that she simply had parents and possibly siblings, or perhaps, all of the above. Rose also discovered that Elize was just 32. Gerard had guessed 32 once, but then his eyesight was better than Rose’s.

As she read on, Gerard poured out teas for them both and helped himself to a couple of biscuits from the tin. He could see that Rose was wrapped up in her own thoughts and hadn’t read far.

Excited to share the details and drama he told her, “The police believe she may have been kidnapped or murdered!” Rose’s eyebrows shot up as she looked up at her husband, shocked.

Leaning in to read directly from the paper, he continued, “The local Inspector – Inspector Lock - said: ‘Her disappearance is completely out of character. Her family are very worried about her and her husband, Edmund Dukes, is beside himself.’”

“Oh, how very sad,” Rose said, shaking her head. She’d known the disappearance was odd and ‘out of character’, but she hadn’t expected it to be something so serious.

“They say the first few days are crucial in finding her – alive, I presume they mean – and are asking for anyone with information, which may help their investigations, to come forward.” Rose nodded her acknowledgement.

The pair then remained sitting together in silence, looking at the article for a while, no longer reading it, but each lost in their own thoughts about the situation. After some time had passed, Gerard quietly said, “You could investigate it, Rose?”

“Sorry?”

“Investigate. See what you can find out about Elize Dukes and where she might be, or what has happened to her.”

Gerard carefully watched his wife’s reaction to this suggestion. He didn’t think he was imagining seeing a little colour coming to her cheeks, a peachy glow; a glow of excitement, he hoped. But instead of answering, Rose surprised him by standing up and heading off to their bedroom.

Once in their bedroom, she knelt down on the floor by their bed and pulled out her ‘Stationery’ crate from underneath it. From this, she then spent a pleasurable moment choosing a new notebook for herself. She settled on an A5 pad she had been gifted, featuring a Parisian scene on the cover, a view of the Eiffel Tower and an elegant woman, wearing a hat, sat at a table outside a cafe, with a coffee.

Upon returning to Gerard in the living room, she brandished the notebook excitedly, with a big smile on her face. “I shall investigate, Gerard!” she proudly announced. The new notebook would be a vital tool for her investigations.

Gerard grinned back at her. “Where will you start?” he asked.