

### Chapter 3

Howard awoke to the sound of a drill bit slicing through his headboard. Only inches away from the blade, his eyes shot open and he quickly rolled to the left and off of the bed.

‘What the...’

The noise was deafening; bits of plaster and wood came away from the wall and flew around the room, landing on the un-kept carpet. Howard crawled to his knees, eager to dodge the menacing spray of debris.

‘Stanley...’ he croaked, his throat dry from last night’s whisky, ‘Stanley, stop!’

The words were ignored, and his next-door neighbour continued to knock through their shared wall. Howard army-crawled out of his bedroom. Retrieving his trousers from the washing basket, he pulled them on in the hallway and headed towards the front door. Outside, the sky was still dark, the moon lost behind a thick fog that settled far in the distance. Howard felt the frosted grass before he saw it. Crisp morning air hit him like an ocean swim, the cool breeze whistling in his ears whilst his skin pricked with goose bumps all down both arms. The door to Stanley Dawson’s house was wide open. It swung on its hinges violently, dancing and creaking in the wind. Though muffled, Howard could still hear the noise of the pistol-grip drill punching through the plaster.

‘Stanley!’

He slammed the door shut behind him, ‘Stanley! Stop, man!’

Howard paced through the hallway and up the oak stairs. Taking two steps a stride, he reached the upper-floor landing in seconds. Three doors were lined up in front of him. The first he knew was to the bathroom, decorated with damp and peeling war-time wallpaper. The second door led into Stanley’s bedroom which was a junkyard of upcycled furniture procured from skips and

laybys. Finally, Howard looked upon the third door. Without a second thought he kicked it open, his bare foot landing just shy of the crooked brass handle. The sight that met his eyes was an unusual one. The study was a mess. The desk was flipped over, pressed up alongside the window, and the bookcases were leaning cautiously against one another, awkwardly balancing on one iron foot each. Stanley stood in the middle of the room, dressed in his everyday striped pyjama set, brandishing an oil splattered Black & Decker circular saw. He looked up, eventually clocking the detective who seemed frozen in the doorway.

‘Oh, Alan,’ he said, a smile spreading across his face, ‘nice of you to drop in!’

Howard jolted to life again and cautiously took a step into the room, ‘What are you doing Stanley?’

‘Oh, this?’ the old man replied, indicating the collection of power tools he had scattered about the study.

Howard nodded.

‘Just a bit of make-do and mend, you know? Never can be too careful, not with those Jerrys about.’

Stanley dropped the saw onto the rug beside him. The tool collided with a paint palette on the ground, launching the roller brush into the air and soiling his trouser leg.

‘Piggin’ ‘ell!’

Howard watched as his neighbour kicked the pot away, staining the floor further.

‘Never mind,’ he muttered, pulling at the hem, ‘Barbara will have these clean in no time.’

The paint tin skidded across the uneven floorboards until it came to a halt under Howard’s heel.

He bent down and turned the pot over, preventing it from spilling again. As he lifted the handle,

he noticed the faded label that had been glued to its side, 'Chestnut Brown, living room sideboard, 1946.'

'Babs chose it,' Stanley interrupted, shaking his head. 'I wanted jade.'

Howard looked up at his neighbour and sighed.

'Come on Stan, let's get you cleaned up, eh?'

Though confused at first, Stanley nodded and began to step slowly towards the detective.

'I'll clean this up later, when the kids get home.'

Howard held out his hand, and the old man took it. His touch was cold, blue veins lining his thin fingers, complimentary against the yellow nails.

'Let's get you a tea and sit downstairs, eh? Bit warmer by the fire.'

Stanley nodded and held the bannister tightly as Howard lured him down the steps.

'Best be quick then lad, I want to catch the evening news on the wireless!'

Howard stopped at the bottom step and took Stanley's arm in his, keeping his balance as they staggered towards the living room door.

'It's half five, Stan...' Howard said, kicking a selection of browning magazines out of his way.

'Exactly, it'll be starting soon-'

'Half five in the morning, Stan.'

The two men stopped next to the cream leather couch. The left side arm was missing and had been replaced by a tea-tray, sidled in against the sofa cushions. Howard loosened his grip on Stanley's arm and slowly lowered him into the seat.

‘Oh,’ came the old man’s response, furrowing his brows and looking up at the detective irately.

‘Well, Babs should have breakfast ready soon.’

Howard sighed and took a step away.

‘Stanley...’ he began, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. ‘Barbara’s gone.’

‘Where is she? Down the shops?’

Howard bit his lip, trying to form a coherent sentence.

‘She’s...well...’

He looked into Stanley’s green eyes and swallowed his words, ‘I tell you what, I’ll ring Rosie.

She can come round and...sort you out.’

‘Rosie?’

‘Rosie,’ Howard repeated. ‘You remember Rosie? Your daughter?’

‘Of course I remember her!’ Stanley replied, folding his arms across his chest. ‘But she’ll be at school.’

Howard took a deep breath and rolled his eyes.

‘I’ll make you that cuppa.’

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‘I’ll be back in a minute Stan, I’m just...popping outside.’

‘Take your time, Alan. I’ll call you when Lidell comes on the radio.’

Shaking his head, Howard opened the front door. Though dark outside, he could just make out the earliest rays of dawn peeking through the grey clouds. The frost had begun to melt as he made his way down the garden path, but the dew still stung like ice against the soles of his bare feet.

‘Shit,’ he whispered, recapturing his balance just as he fell against an un-flowered dahlia bush. The telephone box was only a few feet from Stanley’s front door. Pressed up against the road side, it was rusting and littered with cigarette butts. Half of them, Howard was sure, were his own. Having lived beside Stanley for some time, the detective had finally incorporated an element of his police training exercises and memorised Rosie Dawson’s telephone number. After only two dial tones, Rosie’s sleep-deprived boyfriend answered the call, mumbling into the receiver.

‘Sorry it’s so early, Bill,’ Howard said, drawing shapes on the foggy glass inside the red box. ‘I didn’t know who else to call.’

‘Not to worry, Mr Howard,’ the man on the other end replied. ‘Rosie says she’ll be over as soon as it’s light.’

‘Right you are. I hope you’re well, Bill.’

‘Not too bad. Though, I’m beginning to regret installing this home-telephone now.’

He chuckled.

‘...Mr Howard?... Alan?... You still there?’

He was, but Bill’s words had caught him off-guard.

‘Alan?’

‘Gotta go Bill.’

Howard slammed down the receiver then promptly picked it up again. He re-dialled another number as quick as his numb hands would allow, and agitatedly waited for the response from the other end.

‘Northamptonshire Constabulary. Detective Constable Edward Brookes speaking, how can I help?’

‘She called in using a neighbour’s telephone.’

‘Sir? What are you doing up at this time?’

Much to Howard’s irritation, Brookes had a habit of asking unnecessary questions.

‘Will you shut up a minute!’ the DCI barked back. ‘Peggy Walters called in yesterday using a neighbour’s telephone, you said.’

‘Well...yes. We have it recorded. Hang on.’

Howard could hear papers shuffling on the other end of the line.

‘Okay,’ continued Brookes, as he cleared his throat. ‘She left the park and went to the nearest house. Said the lady had a telephone in her hallway that she used to report the disappearance... Can I ask, why does it matter, Sir?’

Howard’s furrowed brows relaxed into a face of elation as he laughed down the receiver.

‘Why does it matter? I’ll tell you why it matters Brookes. Even better, I’ll show you. Go and pick up Peggy Walters, take McGowan’s car and meet me at the playpark on Alexandra Common.’

‘But Sir, it’s still so early? Will she even be awake?’

‘Oh, she’ll be awake. That women won’t have slept a wink last night, collect her and meet me on the corner in 20 minutes. Go!’

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Howard sat patiently in the driver’s seat of the Cortina TC, awaiting the arrival of his colleague.

He watched as the rising sunbeams bounced off of the bonnet and reflected back at him through silver wing mirrors. Breathing out a cloud of cold air, Howard rubbed his hands together for warmth, flexing his fingers and clapping his palms together. Just as he gave in and reached into his pockets for the leather gloves he frequently refused to wear, the sound of a car horn snatched

his attention. Looking out of the icy window, he locked eyes with Brookes, who had pulled up alongside the Cortina, his window rolled down. Howard did the same.

‘What’s this all about, Sir?’ Brookes asked, a concerned expression forming around his eyes.

‘Park up there and I’ll show you.’

The Austin Allegro drove away and quickly reversed into a loading bay not ten feet from the park. Howard unbuckled and slammed his car door shut. As he walked towards the playground, a flicker of excitement caught him by surprise; the itch that longed to be scratched was finally making a reappearance, and soon enough he’d forgotten all about the gloves.

‘Mr Howard, what’s going on?’

Peggy met him at the gate, the bags under her eyes were illuminated by a thick layer of mascara. Howard looked at her, she was shivering.

‘You not bring a coat, Peggy? It’s bloody cold.’

‘I...it’s in the car.’

Howard looked over her head and shouted at his approaching DC, ‘Brookes, grab Peggy’s coat.’

Brookes stopped in his tracks, spun on his heels and walked in the opposite direction.

‘Alan, will you please tell me what’s going on? Have you found something? Where’s Christopher?’

‘Not just yet,’ Howard replied. He watched her face fall.

‘Oh, I just thought-’

Peggy’s sentence was quickly interrupted by Brookes’ re-arrival.

‘Your coat, Mrs Walters.’

The DC presented her a long black jacket and she took it hesitantly. As Peggy slipped it around her slim shoulders, Howard noticed how it sagged on the arms, and at the chest and at the waist. He knew that it belonged to her husband.

‘Thank you. But please, Mr Brookes, I’ve already said, just call me-’

‘Which house did you ring from, Peggy?’ Howard asked.

Peggy flinched, ‘Sorry?’

‘Which house did you call the station from? When Christopher went missing.’

‘Well...’

She looked at Brookes and then back to the DCI.

‘It was that one.’

Howard followed Peggy’s slender arm and saw it pointed towards a thin building on the very corner of the street, opposite the playpark gate.

‘I ran out of here and banged on that door.’

‘Why that one?’

Peggy shrugged, ‘First house I saw.’

Howard nodded, walking back to the pavement, ‘and who answered?’

Brookes started to follow him, and ushered Peggy to do the same. They marched out of the park and aligned as a group on the side of the road, staring at the house in question.

‘A woman. A lady. Older than me, probably Mam’s age. I asked if she had a telephone and she said she did. Said her son put it in for her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. I called the police from there. Why are you asking me this? Aren’t you supposed to be out lookin’ for him?’



‘Take a look around, Peggy.’

‘Answer me, Mr Howard!’

‘Take a look around and tell me what you see.’

Peggy glared at the DCI. Brookes watched the two of them and shuffled his feet, uncomfortable in the silence. Howard locked his gaze with Peggy and saw her emergent frustration.

‘Tell me what you see,’ he said again, turning her chin with his forefinger, forcing her to face the park.

Peggy jumped away from him, tripping on the curb and awkwardly landing against Brookes. With one hand the DC held her steady, just catching her elbow.

‘Just do what he says,’ he whispered, still clearly in Howard’s earshot, ‘it’s easier that way.’

Finally admitting defeat, Peggy stood up straight and did a 360-degree turn.

‘There’s a swing, and a round-about and a rusty slide.’

Howard nodded and egged her on, ‘what else?’

Peggy rolled her eyes, taking a step towards the iron gate again.

‘Trees?’

‘And what about outside the park?’

‘What’s the point of this?’ Peggy shouted, stamping her foot and sending a fiery glare back at the detectives. ‘This isn’t helping! You’re supposed to be finding my son, but instead you’re asking these stupid...stupid...riddles! And it’s not fair, it’s not fair, Mr Howard. I want my son. I don’t want to play these pathetic games, just please-’

‘There’s a telephone box.’

Brookes quiet voice came out of nowhere.

‘What?’ Peggy insisted, exasperated.

Brookes eyes matched with Peggy’s, and with a subtle head tilt he diverted her gaze to the street opposite. ‘There’s a telephone box over there.’

Following suit, Peggy turned.

‘Oh...oh god.’

Her cheeks blushed scarlet, though her skin seemed to grow paler.

‘Mrs Walt-Peggy, are you alright?’ Brookes leapt up onto the pavement and lunged for her hand.

‘Sit down, Peggy,’ Howard instructed.

Brookes shot back a look of concern, ‘Sir, she can’t sit on the curb, she’ll freeze...’

Howard raised his eyebrows at Brookes’ innocence, ‘Sit with her then.’

The DC began to lower Peggy to the ground, his legs buckling under the weight. Howard watched the two of them perched on the tarmac, trying to avoid drenching their feet in the petrol-infused puddles that had yet to trickle down the drain.

‘Take a deep breath,’ insisted Brookes, his arm cradling Peggy’s shoulders.

The DCI rolled his eyes.

‘Give her space then!’ he barked.

Brookes recoiled. The wind whistled harshly around them, causing a flutter of dark brown leaves to tornado onto the empty roads. Howard watched them toss and turn in the breeze;

spinning violently, spiralling out of control until finally they launched into the sky and danced away.

Dragging his gaze aside, Howard looked back at Peggy who had been watching him.

‘I forgot.’

Her whisper was so soft it was as if she was replicating the wind’s breath.

‘Forgot what?’ Brookes asked.

Peggy pulled the long jacket sleeves tighter around her body. She buried her face in her hands and let out a short cry.

Howard folded his arms, ‘What haven’t you told us, Peggy?’

She looked at him from under her painted lashes, grey eyes dull in the dim light, and began to talk.

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‘And you didn’t think this important to the investigation?’

Howard was pacing up and down the pavement, his hands circling above his head.

‘Sir, I’m sure that-’

Peggy shuffled awkwardly, still seated on the curb, ‘I forgot. I didn’t do it on purpose...’

‘How could you forget?’ the DCI barked. ‘Did you not find it ever so slightly strange for this phone to be ringing for no reason?’

Peggy’s face furrowed into an expression of fury.

‘Of course I thought it was strange!’ she cried, leaping up. ‘That’s why I went to answer it, but there was nobody there.’

Howard sighed heavily, 'And this just slipped your mind?'

'Funnily enough I had other things to worry about when my son fucking disappeared!'

Silence fell over Alexandra Common. Peggy Walters stood in the middle of the road, fists balled, with streams of furious tears tumbling down her made-up cheeks. Brookes, unmoved from the pavement, had his head in his hands, whilst Howard breathed out a sigh of exhaustion. He let the anger wash over him, like the ocean over a rocky shore.

'Peggy.' He leant forward to touch her arm, but she pulled away harshly. 'Peggy, listen.'

'How dare...how dare you speak to me like that!' she screamed, backing away quickly.

'Peggy, I needed to hear-'

'My son is missing and you're interrogating *me*? You're supposed to be looking for him!'

Howard raised his hands apologetically, 'I know. We are. But I just needed to hear-'

'Mam was right about you. You're all pigs, the lot of ya.'

'Peggy, I didn't...'

Howard cut himself off. Brookes cleared his throat and coughed in the sudden quiet.

'Shall we get you home now, Peggy?' he suggested, indicating the car with a nod of his head. 'I think it's been a long...morning.'

Peggy held her chin up as they sidled past the DCI.

'Wait!'

The shout from behind them made Brookes turn.

'I have nothing to say to him,' Peggy muttered, arms crossed.

Howard caught up with the pair and grabbed Peggy's shoulder.

‘Hey! Don’t touch-’

‘Yesterday, who knew you were going to the park?’ he asked, eyes widening with each word.

‘N-nobody,’ Peggy stammered, eagerly trying to release herself from the DCI’s strong hold.

‘Only Mam.’

Howard gently pulled away and nodded at Brookes, who continued to walk on.

The two of them stood in silence. Howard stuck his hands deep inside his coat pockets for warmth, scuffing his shoes on the gravel before speaking again.

‘I didn’t mean to be cruel,’ he said, his voice hushed. Peggy didn’t reply. ‘I just need all the facts, and to hear what happened. From your point of view.’

The sound of a car engine revved just a few feet away.

Peggy stuck out her bottom lip, ‘Well, you’ve heard it now.’

The DCI nodded and looked down, ‘I have.’

The wind blew again, dragging Peggy’s freshly washed hair across her face in strands. She brushed it aside, before glancing at Howard.

‘You look tired, Alan.’

He chuckled under his breath, ‘So do you.’

Peggy let out the faintest smile, ‘Go home and have a kip.’

She turned away and walked to the parked car. The sound of her heels hitting the cobbles echoed through the empty street, until the rhythm was cut short by a door slam and the noise of the Allegro driving away.