

Chapter 2

‘Bit dark in here love,’ said Howard, just as he tripped on the front step of the Walters residence.

‘Mam doesn’t like the lights on,’ Peggy explained. ‘She thinks they’re too harsh.’

Howard nodded and proceeded into the hallway.

‘I think she’s gone to bed.’

Peggy flicked a switch on the wall beside her, and suddenly the entire bottom floor was illuminated by a few naked bulbs dangling from the ceiling. The staircase up to the top floor was painted to match the chipped sideboard and littered with coats, rain-macs and what was, presumably, items of Christopher’s school uniform. As they reached the kitchen, Peggy turned to the DCI.

‘Tea, Mr Howard?’ she asked.

He shook his head, ‘Not for me love, ta.’

‘I’ll have one, if it’s going!’

By the door hovered Brookes, struggling to collapse a giant umbrella that dripped water over the welcome mat. Howard rolled his eyes. He’d tried to suggest that the DC stay to survey the park with Uniform and wait until the morning to fill in the SIO, but Brookes had refused.

‘Two sugars please, Mrs Walters,’ the man called, taking off his jacket and draping it over the bannister with the others. Peggy nodded in response and headed towards the stove. Howard gave Brookes a long hard stare then coughed for attention.

‘Peggy,’ he said, taking a step towards her, ‘let me do that. Go and put something warm on.’

He reached out to take the kettle, brushing her hand slightly as he did. Her skin was like ice and all the colour had drained from her face, leaving only the rouge on her cheeks.

She looked concerned as she gestured around the room, 'Well the cutlery is in the drawer, but be careful because it's a bit of a pain to open. The handle gets stuck, so you really have to-'

Howard hushed her, 'I'll figure it out.'

Eventually Peggy gave in, and retreated up the staircase. Removing her sodden cardigan, she threw it on the floor before disappearing out of sight.

'Right,' said Brookes, clapping his hands together. 'Let's get a brew on then.'

'Will you forget about the bastard tea for a minute!' Howard cried, slamming his hands on the sideboard.

'But, Sir...'

'We're here to talk about a missing child, not meet the damn Queen!'

'Who's down there?'

Howard's words were interrupted by a hoarse cough from the upper floor. Though he couldn't see her, Brookes began to address the voice, straightening his tie as he did, 'Urm, hello Madam, I'm DC-'

Howard shot out his arm and clouted Brookes over the head.

'Ow. Sir, what was that-'

As Howard indicated a zip over his mouth, the DC quickly shut up. From above they could hear scuffed shoes rubbing along tattered carpets, just as the mumbled response of Peggy echoed down the stairs.

'It's the police, Mam. Two detectives, they've come about-'

'Well I know what they've bloody come about, don't I? Where are they? I wanna talk to them, bleedin' pigs.'

‘Mam, please!’

‘Get out me way, Margaret.’

Brookes looked at Howard and raised his eyebrows, just as a thud hit the floorboards at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Where are ya?’ the voice said again, getting closer and closer, until the silhouette finally came into view.

‘You must be Peggy’s mother,’ Howard greeted, pushing Brookes out of the way and stepping towards the woman.

‘What of it?’ she replied, a sneer emerging on her upper lip.

Nana June was a short woman, stocky some might say, but she held herself rather well. Her thick eyebrows merged with the tangled grey hair that covered her wrinkled forehead. She was wrapped in a navy cardigan, paired over the top of a thin white nightie. As she shuffled towards them, her dog-eared slippers slapped the floor with each step.

‘What do you want?’ she spat.

‘Madam, we’re here to discuss your grandson,’ Brookes interjected.

Howard rolled his eyes, ‘Maybe we could take a seat in the living room?’

‘I don’t want you ‘ere. You lot. You’re nothing but trouble, get out!’

‘Mrs Walters, please...’

‘I’m not Mrs Walters! See, you can’t even get that right!’

Nana June was waving her arms so violently that Howard was sure she was about to keel over.

‘Mr Howard, I told you.’

Without anyone realising, Peggy had appeared in the doorway and was standing behind her mother.

‘Mrs Walters was my mother-in-law. Mam’s name is Bradley.’

The DCI looked at Peggy and cocked his head. Her hair was tied up into a bun, with a towel slung around her shoulders to catch the dripping water. He noticed that she’d changed into some light blue cotton pyjamas. Howard thought they made her look younger, even more vulnerable than she previously seemed.

‘Right,’ he mumbled, just as the kettle started to whistle. ‘I apologise Mrs Bradley. Please take a seat in the living room, and we can talk this over properly. Let me make you a tea.’

Nana June snorted, ‘I’m not letting coppers take hostage of *my* kitchen.’

‘Mam, please...’ Peggy whispered, gripping her mother’s wrist.

‘Oh fine, fine!’ Nana June huffed and turned to walk away. ‘Three sugars!’

As she disappeared around the corner, Howard looked at his DC.

‘Go with her, Brookes.’

Without a word, Brookes nodded and followed the woman out of the room.

‘The cups are above your head,’ Peggy said, pointing to a cupboard that seemed just out her own reach. Howard opened it and pulled out four china mugs, all chipped in different places, ‘Thanks.’

He placed them on the counter and began to wander around. After a moment, he spotted a jar of tea bags in the corner, snuggled in between the toaster and a loaf of stale bread. He threw a bag in each of the cups and then filled them three-quarters of the way full with the boiled water.

Bubbles of condensation slid down the delicate handles and pooled a ring of tea on the counter

top. As he turned around, leaving the drinks time to brew, he saw that Peggy was sitting on the sideboard behind him, swinging her legs as if she were a child.

‘This is where Christopher sits,’ she said, staring at her bare feet. ‘Every single morning whilst I’m frying eggs. He sits here and watches me.’

Howard saw her eyes start to water again.

‘You’ve kept his surname.’

Peggy looked up and sniffed back a tear.

‘What?’ she replied.

‘Walters,’ Howard explained, leaning back against the cupboards and folding his arms. ‘You kept your husband’s surname, even though you’re not with him anymore.’

Peggy looked startled, her eyes widening and her knuckles whitening under the strain of the tea spoon she was clutching.

‘I...’ she stammered. ‘Well, yes. I never thought about changing it.’

Howard’s eyes narrowed, ‘Why?’

‘Well...’ she started up again, ‘too much hassle.’

The DCI looked away.

‘And I didn’t want to put Christopher through it, he’d never understand.’

Howard closed his eyes, and tried to rephrase the questions whirling inside his head.

‘What does Christopher know? Of his dad.’

Peggy sighed and dropped the spoon into the sink.

‘Not much. Nothing at all really. Mike was only around three years, before he buggered off. Chrissy doesn’t even remember what he looks like.’

He gazed at Peggy; the tears had vanished and suddenly there was anger in her eyes. Howard took a step towards her, with the soul intention of reclaiming the spoon she’d just abandoned, but just as he did, Peggy jolted to the side. She looked terrified, her eyes glazed over with fear and all her muscles tensed. Howard drew back and clapped his hands together.

‘Milk?’ he asked, keeping his voice calm and steady, sensing the anxiety in the room.

‘It’s on the back step.’

The handle was cold but moved with ease as Howard turned it anti-clockwise. It only took a second before the glass door fully swung open and was letting in a harsh draft.

‘Do you keep this unlocked?’ he asked. Looking back at Peggy, he saw another flash of worry cross her face.

‘Not usually...’ she stammered, pushing herself off of the counter and walking towards him.

‘Mam will have forgotten to lock it before she went up.’

Howard recognised the concern in her voice. Peggy sighed, ‘She must have been distracted.’

He noticed the hairs on her arms stand up in the cold air, just as her teeth started to chatter.

‘You go through and join them,’ he said, pulling the door to. ‘I’ll bring these in.’

Peggy continued to stare at the handle, though nodded all the same and soon left the DCI standing alone in the kitchen. He waited until he was sure she was out of earshot and then began to snoop through the cupboards, in the hope of finding something worthwhile. He wasn’t certain of what he was looking for, but even the smallest indication of irregularity was vital at the beginning of any investigation. After a few minutes, and having only found the odd cracked

gravy boat, he decided to call his search inconclusive. Giving up, he threw his hands in the air in frustration and brought them down hard on the counter top, knocking a butter knife from the dish onto the tiled floor.

‘You okay in there, Sir?’ came Brookes’ apprehensive voice from the living room.

‘Fine. Everything’s fine,’ Howard barked back, but as he knelt down to retrieve the knife, something snatched his attention from the corner of his eye. An object was caught in the 3cm space between the wall and the six-foot kitchen unit to his left. A package was glinting, the shine reflecting in the thin beam of light that came from the lamp in the corridor. Without hesitation, Howard walked over and put his hand flat against the wall. Using his little finger as a hook, he managed to prise the bundle out from behind the cupboard and it fell with a quiet thud onto the floor. The DCI squatted, the sole of his leather boots squeaking under his weight. Cautiously, he picked up the plastic pocket, turning it over and thumbing it delicately until he recognised its contents. It was a cash bag, the sort they dish out coppers in at the arcade but this one held far more than spare change. Howard unfolded the notes slowly, counting them in his head until the total sum came to £50.

‘Well, well, well, what’s all this then?’ he joked to himself, quietly.

‘Sir?’

Brookes’ voice from the doorway came as such a surprise that Howard fell from the unbalanced position on his heels, head first onto the floor.

‘God dammit, Brookes!’ he shouted, keeping the money behind his back. ‘Don’t sneak up on a man. Ever.’

Brookes looked back, worried, ‘I’m...I’m sorry, Sir. We were just wondering how the...urm...the tea was getting along?’

For a moment, Howard didn't know how to react. He clenched his fist and lifted himself from the floor until he was in an upright position.

'Right,' he coughed, glancing at the drinks that had been brewing for far too long. 'I'm just getting them now.'

'Did you...need a hand?'

Howard's gaze met Brookes' nervous stare.

The DCI smiled faintly, 'That would be great.'

Brookes' eyes widened as he realised that he was finally wanted for something other than 'distracting the witness'.

'Could you get the milk from outside?' Howard asked politely, opening up the back door again, allowing a frosty chill to dance around the kitchen.

'Of course, Sir,' Brookes said, eagerly walking passed him and out into the night, 'right away, Sir.'

Howard only had seconds before the DC would be back, and he knew he wouldn't hold fire on the questions if he saw what Howard had found. So, silently, the DCI managed to slip the money pouch back behind the cupboard without a hitch. He stepped away from the cabinet and turned his back on the door, nursing the cups before Brookes re-entered.

'H-here you are, Sir,' he stammered, placing a glass bottle on the counter top. Howard grunted with gratitude as he frantically spooned mountains of sugar into mugs at random.

'Take these in, will you?' he said, thrusting the cups at Brookes, once he'd sloshed some milk over the sides.

Brookes shuffled out through the doorway again, 'Y...yes, Sir.'

After one final glance around the kitchen, Howard followed his DC into the living room to find Peggy and Nana June hunched on the sofa in the corner, with Brookes perched awkwardly on a wicker armchair to the side of them. The room was odd. It was small, with the worn-out couch pressed up against the longest wall, and a mahogany dresser opposite, decorated with lace doilies and the occasional water stain. The artwork was dated; cheap knock-off versions of Constable's work graced the walls, curling and turning yellow in their plastic frames. The wallpaper was bubbling at the edges, making the colour palette of mustard and olive stripes even more alarming. A faint scent of smoke hung in the air, and Howard spotted the numerous ash trays all lined up, one by one, across the mantel piece under a large oval mirror.

'Let's get this over and done with,' Nana June grunted, moving a pillow out from behind her back. She turned to her daughter, scowling, 'They take the piss, these bloody coppers.'

Peggy rolled her eyes and sent Howard an apologetic look. He dismissed the remark with a wave of his hand.

'Mrs Bradley,' he began, taking only three strides until he found himself on the other side of the room. 'We need to have a chat about what happened today.'

'I bloody know what happened!' the old woman snapped at the DCI, cup of tea in hand.

'Someone telephoned from the scene and informed you, did they?' he asked back, matching her glare. Nana June stopped for a moment, seemingly catching her own tongue before responding. She straightened up and manipulated her lips into a strange pout.

'No.'

Brookes fidgeted in his seat, 'Then how did you-'

'How did you know then, Mam?' Peggy interrupted, leaning forward and looking her mother in the eye. 'I never got a chance to tell you before I got home.'

Nana June coughed and folded her arms, ignoring each intense glower from around the room.

‘Someone else told me,’ she replied.

‘Who?’ asked Brookes and Peggy in unison.

‘Some lad from the street. Passed me as I was watering the flowers out front.’

Howard furrowed his eyebrows and gazed out of the bay window in front of him. Of course in the night’s darkness there was nothing to see, bar the odd stretch of pavement illuminated by overhead street lamps.

‘But how, Mam?’ Peggy continued, clinging to her mother’s shoulder. ‘How did *he* know?’

Nana June shrugged her off and readjusted the slightly askew cardigan.

‘How am I supposed to know?’ she replied, her lip curling upwards. ‘All he said was that our Christopher had gone missing. Then he ran off again.’

Brookes looked up at his DCI, an expression of concern clouding his gaze.

‘Do you know him? The boy?’ Howard pressed.

Nana June sighed, ‘Never seen him before in me life.’

Peggy let out a short cry of desperation as she tore away from her mother. She rolled onto her side, curling into a ball and burying her face in her hands.

‘What’s happening?’ she croaked, catching tears in her throat. ‘How can this be happening?’

Howard walked back to the couch and nestled himself onto the arm of the sofa.

‘Come on Peggy,’ he said, placing his hand on her shoulder, and smoothing out the goose bumps.

‘Get your bloody hands off her!’ Nana June shouted, leaning over her daughter and batting the DCI’s arm away. In the commotion, Brookes leapt from his seat but was now unsure by what to do with himself. Howard stood again, straightening himself out as he held his hands up to Nana June.

‘June, we’re just trying to get to the bottom of this-’

Nana June refused to let him finish, ‘Then what the bloody hell are you doing here? You should be out there looking for him! There’s no use hanging around here, moping all day, trying it on with my daughter, when you should be *trying* to find him!’

‘Mrs Bradley, I can assure you that DCI Howard wasn’t-’

Though grateful for his loyalty, Howard hushed Brookes with a stern stare. Peggy was still curled up, clutching the arm of the couch as if it was a lifebuoy and she were drifting away to sea.

‘We will do everything we can,’ assured Howard, focusing his efforts on keeping a calm demeanour, ‘I promise.’

That seemed enough for Nana June, as she nodded and announced that she wouldn’t say another word until her grandson was found. Brookes looked even more worried than before, as the old woman rose from her seat and plodded towards the living room door.

‘Now if you don’t mind,’ she said, batting the DC out of her way, ‘I’m going back to bed and I do not want to be disturbed again.’

Just as she reached for the door handle, Nana June abruptly tugged on Howard’s jacket sleeve, causing him to lose balance on the foot he was leaning on.

‘You find him,’ the old woman spat, her lips so close to his ear he could feel the saliva landing on his skin. ‘You find that boy and you bring him back to my daughter, do you understand me?’

Howard pulled away cautiously, just catching her gaze before she retreated into the corridor and out of sight.

‘I will,’ he said, though he couldn’t be sure who it was he was trying to convince.

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‘It was good of you to put Mrs Walters to bed, Sir,’ said Brookes, as the two detectives left the house and headed down the garden path. ‘She looked exhausted.’

Howard nodded in agreement, ‘She’s been through a lot today. She’ll sleep all through tomorrow.’

Though he knew this was a lie. He knew that Peggy would be up all night, stricken with horrific nightmares of grotesque thoughts, all centred around her boy and where he might be. She would wake up and convince herself that the whole thing had been a dream; a terrifying vision that ended the second she awoke. She’d walk downstairs, expecting to find her son sitting in the living room playing with his cars, using the mantel piece as a racing track and destroying the threads on the carpet. But instead the house would be empty, and she’d see four tea cups in the kitchen sink that would remind her of yesterday’s events, spurring on a second wave of hysterical panic.

‘We can call her in tomorrow,’ Brookes added, as he swung the gate open, catching it in his hand before walking through. ‘And I think we’ll get the boys to try and track down this lad from the street, see what he has to say for himself. Don’t you agree, Sir?...Sir?’

But Howard wasn’t listening. He’d stopped in the middle of the path and was gazing back at the front of the house, eyes darting over the window frame and foliage beneath.

Brookes called back to him, ‘What is it, Sir?’

Howard crouched down and patted the earth at his feet.

‘She said the boy passed her when she was watering the flowers,’ he mumbled, as the dirt stained the cuff of his shirt. ‘But it’s been raining all day.’

Brookes’ eyes widened as the thought on dawned him.

‘Why would you water flowers when it’s been raining all day?’

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