

Chapter 1

‘Christopher, get a move on...’

Peggy Walters was standing in the doorway of her kitchen, a brown, home-sewn pinafore tied loosely around her slim waist. ‘I thought you wanted to go to the park?’

She called upstairs to her son again, hoping for even the slightest reaction, but still nothing happened. Her patience was beginning to wear thin, as she reached for a broom in the cupboard beside her. In one swift move, she swung it into the air and started to bang on the ceiling. ‘Christopher, I’m going to count to three and if you’re not down those stairs by the time I’m done, then there will be no park, and you’ll have to stay in with Nana June for the rest of the day!’

‘It’s nice to know I’m only used as a threat,’ said a bitter, croaky voice.

‘Come off it, Mam. You know what I mean,’ Peggy retorted, replacing the broom.

Nana June huffed. The old woman was sitting in a wicker chair in the corner of the room, wrapped up and clutching a cup of stone-cold tea. She fidgeted under her woolly blanket, ‘He’ll never learn-’

But her voice was interrupted by a sudden thud; Christopher was bounding down the stairs, two at a time. As he leant against the banister, a gappy-grin spread across his jam-stained face, ‘I’m ready!’

‘Oh no you’re not!’

‘I am!’

Peggy grabbed her son by the chin, ‘What’s all this muck? Is that marmalade on your cheek?’

Christopher tried to pull away but his mother held him tightly, as she spat on the corner of her pinafore and wiped it across her son’s face.

‘Ugh,’ he squirmed in her arms. ‘Stop, Mummy, stop!’

Eventually Christopher managed to wriggle free, throwing himself down in the middle of the hallway and pulling on his wellington boots.

‘I don’t have to stay with Nana June, right?’ he asked, his hazel eyes shining.

The clatter of china came from behind them.

‘Oh bloody thank you,’ Nana June snorted. ‘I’m going for a nap.’

As Nana June retreated into the living room, Peggy threw on her husband’s old cardigan that had been hanging on the banister. Reaching for her son’s hand, she stepped over the threshold and called out after her, ‘We’ll see you later, Mam.’

‘Hrmph,’ came the grumbled response.

Outside, the sky was slate grey; ominous clouds circled overhead and a crisp chill swept down the street. Christopher sniffed.

‘You’re getting a cold,’ Peggy sighed.

‘I’m not!’

‘You are. You’ve got snot everywhere.’

He dragged his nose across his jacket sleeve.

‘Not anymore.’

Peggy rolled her eyes.

‘Alright mister, but put this on, I won’t have you bed-bound first week after Christmas.’

She released his hand, and unravelled the red scarf from around her neck. Peggy lassoed her son towards her and quickly began to bundle him up, his scarlet cheeks just visible amongst the wool.

‘Perfect,’ she smiled. ‘Let’s get going then.’

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It was only a short walk, five minutes down the road if Christopher didn’t stop to look for insects in the hedgerow on the way. He was interested in all things small; any creature, any flower, any milk-bottle cap, he’d collect and store in an old shoe box kept in the garden shed.

‘Bizarre,’ his Dad used to say, but Peggy thought he was just excited to see the world. As they approached the park, Christopher dropped her hand and ran off.

‘There’s nobody on the swings!’ he cried.

‘Watch the road.’

Peggy followed her son onto the common. It was a small playground: a swing set, an old round-about and a rusting metal slide in one corner, and an onset of trees in the other.

‘We’re lucky today, Chrissy. The whole park to ourselves.’ The lack of a scarf made the piercing wind bite her harder, whistling through her ears and pricking her skin with goose-bumps. She hugged the cardigan tight around her body, bringing both arms inside, and clenching her fists to savour the little warmth left. Looking out across the green, she saw her son spinning violently on the round-about.

‘Mummy look at me!’ he cried, giggling as his head whipped round, faster and faster with each turn.

‘I see you. Watch you don’t get sick.’

She smiled at him, producing a black plastic lighter and a single cigarette from her pocket. She'd taken up a smoking habit just after Christopher was born. Back then everything had been about the baby, and she wanted something that was all hers, so it seemed the only viable option. Pressing the roll-up to her lips, she lit the tobacco; the flame made her shiver as the slight blast of heat licked her fingertips. Another elated screech echoed through the park, Christopher was on the swing this time, the scarf fluttering high in the air like a flag in a storm.

Basking in the blissful silence for precious seconds, Peggy closed her eyes. She exhaled deeply, seduced by the smoke, though in moments her daydream was shattered by a shrill shriek. She sat puzzled, willing her brain to ignore it, but a curious itch scratched away in her mind. She looked around, searching for an open window, assuming the noise was from a nearby house, but there was nobody about. Then she saw it. Across the road, a red telephone box stood on the corner of Osmond Street connecting up to Alexandra Avenue. The ringing was coming from inside, but there was no one to answer.

After a minute or so, the repetitious trill became aggravating, as if it was burying deep within her ears and getting louder and louder as the seconds passed. Swearing, Peggy stood up and without looking, pressed the half-smoked cigarette into the rotting bench. The ash burnt her fingers, and the butt fell onto the tarmac, but Peggy didn't care; she was half-way across the grass, walking toward the iron railings.

'Look Mummy, snails!'

She batted away Christopher's comment without even turning around, 'That's nice, sweetheart.'

The gate swung open, its groan lost in the vicious breeze. Still the telephone box blared, though the tone seemed lower, as if it were getting tired of ringing, and wanted to be put out of its misery. Peggy reached the road and stopped, she turned her head left, then right. Though it seemed the world was empty, she was still cautious.

In the corner of her eye, she made out a vehicle; a small black car hurtling down the street, away from the park, but before she could catch a second glimpse, it turned a corner and disappeared. Peggy didn't dwell however, and walked across the road and onto the pavement on the other side, only to realise that the air had gone silent. The phone had stopped ringing.

Peggy stared at the red-box, and pulled the door open. She stepped inside, the stench of piss and Special Brew fumigating her senses, and then, rather hesitantly, reached for the receiver.

'Hello?'

A long drone rang out.

She scowled at it, and even tried punching in a number, but the dial tone was dead. *Strange*, she thought, returning the phone to the cradle.

The clouds were well and truly upon her now, casting a dark shadow on the park. Almost immediately she forgot the phantom telephone call, and looked up, just as a single droplet of rain landed on her cheek.

'Damn it. Christopher...' she called out, still staring up at the sky. The breeze too picked up, as an orchestra of crisp leaves formed underfoot, 'We'd better get a move on.'

Peggy muttered under her breath as she pulled the cardigan collar up and ran across the road. She kept her gaze downward, actively trying to avoid the spitting rain from getting in her eyes. Pushing the gate open with her foot, she re-entered the playground.

'Christopher, let's get going, I don't want...'

But Peggy was alone in the park.

‘Christopher?’

No reply.

Immediately her heartrate doubled and goose bumps aligned on her skin. Subconscious anxiety started to bubble, her stomach felt empty and her throat was dry, ‘Christopher? Christopher, stop these games now!’

Peggy ran over to the woodland, a small forest of bursting foliage bordering the common.

‘Christopher...’ she called out, pushing back branches and stepping on fallen twigs.

‘Mummy’s going now. Christopher!’

Still no answer. The eeriness of the pounding heartbeat in her chest filled her head with a loud drumming, and suddenly there was a bitter metallic taste in her mouth.

‘Chrissy...’

She listened for his laugh, that childish giggle he used when playing practical jokes on Nana June, but she heard nothing. The rain overhead was battering hard on the leaves of the trees, so much so that Peggy couldn’t hear herself think, ‘Christoph- Chris! Please!’

She tripped and fell over a moss-covered log, snagging her skirt on the broken branches, whilst pooling water formed small rivers in the undergrowth.

‘Chris? Christopher!’

Peggy felt breathless and light-headed, the sudden panic clouding her judgement as she pulled herself out of the brushes.

‘Christopher, I’m going to count to three and if you’re not standing here in-’

But she was cut off by the slow moan of old metal swaying in the wind. As she turned to look, praying to see her son's smiling face, Peggy's blood turned to ice inside her already frozen skin. There, in the corner of the empty playground was a red scarf, abandoned on the seat of a broken swing.

DCI Alan Howard watched through the window as the red Cortina TC pulled up alongside the pavement. He rolled his eyes and threw the remainder of his freshly brewed coffee into the kitchen sink.

'What is it now?' he muttered.

The sharp knock at the door came in three single beats, with a furious foot-tapping coming from the other side.

'It's open!'

Without hesitation, in walked a young man, dressed in a charcoal overcoat and a tweed flap cap.

'What is it, Brookes?' Howard asked, without looking up.

'I'm sorry, to...uhh...disturb you Sir, on your...uhh...day off...'

Howard rolled his eyes, and walked into the hallway where his colleague was standing.

'Out with it, son.'

Brookes adjusted his sleeves. His shirt was too big for him, Howard could tell; the pin-striped collar poked out too high and the buttons at the chest sagged, it was obvious he was trying hard to make an impression.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Brookes said, ‘we’ve had a missing persons situation called in... uhh... Sir. Reported around three o’clock this afternoon.’

‘Is this a case for CID?’ Howard asked, turning around with a furrowed brow. ‘If it’s not been 24 hours, it’s a problem for Uniform.’

He turned away and muttered under his breath, ‘Honestly, I leave McGowan in charge of you lot for five minutes and-’

‘It’s a child, Sir.’

Brookes voice sliced through him like a knife in warm butter.

‘A young lad. Six-years-old, taken from the play-park on Alexandra Common. His Mam called in from a neighbour’s telephone.’

Howard clenched his fists, his knuckles whitening.

‘You spoken to her yet?’ he asked.

Brookes shook his head, fiddling with the cap in his hands, ‘No, Sir. I thought you’d want to.’

‘Good call, son. Now, give me the car keys.’

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They pulled up outside the park just before five; it would’ve been pitch black if it wasn’t for the flood-lit lamps dotted around the scene. Blue tape cautioned off the surrounding area, with a police officer standing in each corner, keeping worried onlookers at bay. Howard rolled his eyes, even in the most desolate part of town there were still a few nosey-parkers about, if only a handful. Two elderly ladies hobbled past with trolleys, craning their necks for

a quick look, followed by a concerned jogger whose evening running streak had been disturbed. Howard stepped out of the vehicle, and stretched, before slamming the car door.

‘Let’s get this place cleared,’ he murmured, opening the boot and pulling out a camel-hair coat, that he then draped over his shoulders.

Brookes took his position on the pavement, ‘Alright ladies and gents, move along, please!’

Nobody was listening.

‘If you do not work for the Northamptonshire Constabulary, I want you off this patch now!’

The sounds of scuffed shoes on paving slabs echoed down the street, as the bystanders dispersed into the dusk.

‘W-well said, Sir,’ Brookes stammered, fidgeting for warmth. ‘I was going to say that.’

Howard grunted, just as the spitting rain got heavier. He fiddled with the collar of his coat, as if simply shielding his neck would keep him dry in the oncoming storm.

‘Sir.’

His thoughts were interrupted by the voice of a young man.

Howard turned around and was greeted by a tall bobby who was huddled under a tartan umbrella.

‘The woman, the mother, she’s over there.’

Howard followed the path of the policeman’s outstretched arm, and saw a figure sitting on a crooked swing in the playground, ‘Bit of a looker, ain’t she?’ he joked, one eyebrow cocked.

‘Why is nobody with her?’ Howard barked.

‘She won’t speak to us, Sir’ replied the man, struggling to keep up with Howard’s stride.

‘We’ve tried to move her, but she won’t budge.’

Howard stopped sharp and glared at him, ‘So you just left her there to freeze?’

‘I...err...I didn’t know what-’

‘Get me my DC,’ Howard snarled. ‘And give me that!’

In one swoop, Howard had snatched the umbrella from his hands, and stalked off.

The rain had harshened rather rapidly in the minutes since they’d arrived, though the weather conditions evidently didn’t bother the woman still sitting silently on the swing.

‘Evenin’ love,’ the DCI said walking over to her. ‘Mrs Walters, isn’t it?’

He held the umbrella over her head, though it seemed that the damage had already been done.

Her thick-knitted cardigan was sodden, and strands of thin auburn hair were plastered to the side of her face. Although now sheltered, she didn’t acknowledge Howard’s presence at all.

‘I’m DCI Alan Howard, let’s get this sorted, shall we? Get you home in time for tea.’

All of a sudden, she moved; her gaze darted up towards Howard who stared into her broken grey eyes.

‘It’s Peggy,’ she whispered, wiping her forehead. ‘Mrs Walters was my mother-in-law.’

At that moment, Brookes arrived, holding a copy of *The Northampton Chronicle* over his head for cover.

‘You asked for me, Sir?’ he panted.

‘Right,’ replied Howard, without turning away. ‘Fetch Peggy a cup of tea.’

Brookes looked unimpressed.

‘But Sir, Uniform already offered-’

Howard widened his gaze and took a step toward his colleague. The shoulder-pads in his jacket thickened his frame, making him look more domineering than ever, ‘Now.’

‘C...course.’

Intimidated, the DC nervously nodded, and skulked away in silence.

Howard watched him leave, then turned again to the woman beside him. She’d gone back to staring into nothingness, her hands fiddling with the gold band on her ring finger.

‘Have you called him?’ Howard asked, leaning forward. ‘Your husband?’

‘He won’t answer.’

‘Well, I’m sure if I-’

She shook her head, wiping her nose on her sleeve, ‘He isn’t around anymore.’

The DCI closed his eyes, listening to the drumming rain ricocheting off of the tin slide.

‘Peggy,’ he began, softly. ‘What happened this afternoon?’

Her body stiffened, the blue veins in her neck prominent against the almost translucent skin.

‘I know it’s going to be hard, but I need to know-’

‘Can you find him?’ she whispered, one bony hand clutching his tanned arm. ‘I’ll tell you everything I remember but please, Mr Howard-

‘Call me, Alan.’

‘Please, you have to find him.’

The DCI looked down; Peggy’s icy grip was like a vice on his wrist, her slender fingers wrapped so tightly it was as if she was clinging to the only shred of hope left.

‘Here you are, Mrs Walters,’ came a voice. Howard looked up to see Brookes had returned, a small polystyrene cup in his hand. ‘It’s from the café just down the road.’

Peggy recoiled from Howard’s touch, and declined Brookes’ offering with a shake of her head. The drenched DC looked back at his boss despairingly.

‘Peggy,’ Howard said, readjusting his grip on the umbrella handle. ‘You’re frozen solid, love.’

With his free hand, Howard took the tea from Brookes, who could only watch on in helpless wonder, and passed it to Peggy. Thankfully, this time she accepted.

‘The case has been reported to the SIO, Sir,’ interjected Brookes, ‘and McGowan is on his way too.’

Without warning, Peggy leapt up from the swing, pushing the iron chain out of the way and stormed toward the DC.

‘That’s my son!’ she screamed. ‘He’s not a ‘case’! He’s a boy!’

Brookes held his hands in front of him and staggered backwards.

‘How dare you! How can you call him that? He’s-’

Howard collapsed the umbrella, and dropped it onto the ground beside him.

‘Peggy, what DC Brookes meant was-’

His attempt to calm her down was interrupted by a harrowed wail. Peggy tore away from them both and fell to her knees, the cup in her hands dropping to the floor, flooding lukewarm tea into the already saturated grass.

‘I want my boy...’ she sobbed, tears staining her rouged skin. ‘I want my son. Help me, Mr Howard, Alan. You have to help me!’

Howard sank to one knee, marking his corduroy trousers with thick mud as he pulled Peggy towards his chest.

‘I’ll do everything I can, love,’ he said, placing one large hand onto the back of her head, and stroking her hair. ‘Leave it with me.’

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