



*a&b*

# INTO THE DARK

STUART JOHNSTONE

## CHAPTER ONE

Mr Beeswax

‘Hello, emergency service operator, which service? . . .  
Emergency service operator, do you require fire, police, or  
ambulance? . . . Hello? . . . Is there someone there? . . . How  
can I help you? . . . Hello, is there—’

‘Aye, aye. I’m here.’

‘Hello, sir. What is the nature of your emergency? . . .  
Sir? I need you to tell me—’

‘Well, if you’d just shut up for a minute maybe I would  
tell you, wouldn’t I?’

‘Angie, I think it’s Mr Beeswax.’

‘What’s that? Who’re you talkin’ to there?’

‘Nothing, Mr . . . uh, sir. I was just consulting my  
colleague. How can I help you tonight?’

‘I’ll tell you how you can help me . . . I just, eh. What is  
it now?’

‘Sir, could I start by taking your name please?’

‘Don’t interrupt me. Ach, I’ve gone and lost my train of . . . Didn’t your mother teach you not to interrupt people? It’s rude. Ach, where was I now?’

‘Sorry, sir. But your name please? I need to log the call and I need your—’

‘My name? I’ll tell you what my name is, it’s none of your bloody beeswax, that’s what my name is.’

‘Thank you, sir. I’ll log that for you. Now what is it we can do for you tonight? You have something you’d like to report I assume?’

‘Are you laughing? I can hear you laughing. Your little pal beside you, too.’

‘No, no. Not laughing, sir. We’d never do that. What is it you’d like to report Mr Bees . . . eh, sir?’

‘You *are* laughin’. I can hear ye and whoever it is you’re with. I can hear them an’ all.’

‘Sir, I can assure you, there is nobody laughing here. Now what is it today, sir? Theft of a yeti, perhaps? Has another monster been assaulted?’

‘You *are* takin’ the piss. I bloody knew it. And what do ye mean again? I’ve never called you before in my life, ya cheeky wee—’

‘Now, now sir. No need for any bad language. What is it to be? Aliens in the park? Armed robbery of a—’

‘He’s butchered him. He’s bloody butchered him and dumped him in a damned ditch.’

‘. . . Uh . . .’

‘Cut his eyes out, so he has. What kind of a monster could . . . Cut his eyes out?’

‘Sir, what exactly are we talking about here? . . . Sir, are you still there? . . . Sir, are you still on the line?’

‘Cut his eyes—’

‘Sir? Hello? No, he’s gone.’

‘That’s it. He just hung up after that. What do you think?’ DS Cunningham swept the mouse to the top right of his computer screen and closed the window.

Alyson Kane rubbed at her arm where goosebumps had formed. ‘That got pretty dark, pretty quick. What are we listening to?’

‘A treble-nine call, obviously. The DCI wants it looked into.’

‘It’s a bit . . . unprofessional. Don’t you think?’

DS Cunningham laughed. ‘It is a bit. I’d hate to be the poor sod who handled that call. If he’d thought for a second it was going to be studied in connection to a murder case, he would have stuck to the script, for sure.’

Alyson lifted one of the Starbucks coffees she’d placed on the table in front of them and sipped. Her train had been late this morning, therefore so was she, and rather than run to McNair Street Police Station, she’d allowed a few more minutes of tardy timekeeping to bring her sergeant a placating gesture. Coffee never failed. When he stopped her in the corridor, she thought perhaps this trick had been played one too many times, but he hadn’t seemed to have noticed the time and ushered her into his office to play her the recording of the call.

‘So, what’s the story, boss? Is this to do with the Bradley case?’ she asked, pointing at the MP3 file in the folder on the screen.

'I'll tell you in the car. This coming in has reminded the DCI that it's been a while since we updated the family and you and I have drawn the short straw,' he said, standing up.

Alyson's heart sank. If this wasn't the worst part of the job, she didn't ever want to see what beat it. She followed Duncan through the enormous room on the third floor of McNair Police Station, which was empty but for a few lone DCs typing away at terminals. Outside, she dropped herself into the passenger seat of the unmarked Ford, clutching her coffee to her like a safety blanket. She prayed he'd be doing the talking this time. During the last visit he'd left it to her and she'd stumbled over her words and tortured herself by playing a constant loop of it in her mind for days afterwards.

'So, this recording . . .' she prompted him, once they'd joined traffic.

'Right, well, this guy, he's a frequent crank caller. Or maybe not a crank, more confused. Mr Beeswax, as they called him, phones in maybe once every other month. They traced it to a care home out in Edinburgh. He calls in at crazy hours of the night, reporting outlandish things. He's clearly senile. The call handlers are bored to tears at that hour and I suppose they were just have a bit of fun with him. Unprofessional, but harmless, really.'

'Until now. It's the eyes thing, I suppose?'

'That's right.'

'And the DCI wants *me* to look into it?' A jolt of euphoria surged through her, displacing the dread of updating the family and making her feel a little lightheaded.

'She does, yes. But Alyson, don't get excited. The thing

is, that call you listened to is from March.'

'What? You're kidding.'

'I'm afraid not. Three full weeks before Callum's murder.'

The euphoria in Alyson's chest dropped into her stomach, morphing through disappointment into something more resembling irritation. She took a moment before she spoke; counting to ten, her mum called it. 'Then what's the point? I'm assuming Mr Beeswax, or whatever his name is, isn't considered a suspect, or even a witness. Why this? Why me?'

She could hear the petulance in her voice, despite her best intentions. But Duncan Cunningham was one of the good ones; he was three years before his retirement and so had long since given up on any career advancement. In Alyson's experience, you remove ambition from a gaffer and you end up with a level-headed one. They're the ones you can rely on to help you with your career. There's no competition, no games. Along with the ladder-climbing, he'd also given up on his appearance a bit. He had no problem wearing the same shirt and tie combination four days in a row. He was bald across the majority of his head, with a Caesar's laurel of hair remaining which he allowed to grow, bucking the middle-aged shave-it-all trend and so making him look older than his fifty-eight years.

He was silent as he negotiated a roundabout, then took the exit for Rickerburn, before addressing her again: 'It's desperation, that's what it is. The DCI's feeling the pressure and you know as well as I do that shit rolls downhill. Twelve weeks with no tangible leads, suspects or witnesses and she's getting . . . creative . . . in the face of some tricky

questions from above. That's what I think.'

'But this could be looked into by anyone. It'll take all of an afternoon. Why not get uniform on it?' Alyson unfolded her arms, conscious of how much like a sulking teenager she must look.

Duncan turned to her, exhaling. 'You want some advice?'

'That's rhetorical, right?'

'Of course it is. Look, just go with it, and do it with a grateful smile on your face. You remember what the incident room looked like last month?'

'It was going like a fair.'

'Every spare detective, pro-active team member and a small army of uniform all queueing to get five minutes on a computer terminal. Now you have your pick from dozens. They're scaling this back big time, but for the moment, you're still involved. Don't give them an excuse to send you back to interviewing plebs for housebreakings. Go do this and don't rush back. Get some local help and stay involved.'

He had a point. A good one. The day after a dog walker had discovered the mutilated remains of ten-year-old Callum Bradley – his body dumped at the side of an old open-cast mine, his eyes . . . God, Alyson never wanted to see *those* photographs again – they had set up the dedicated Major Incident room. The day she'd entered, it had seemed small and ridiculously crowded. Alyson had been rescued from a housebreaking team to which she'd been seconded to for three months, but which had stretched into a tedious seven months. What was she complaining about? All the things she'd been tasked with had been pretty mundane. Collect CCTV here, log

productions there; but now she was working a murder.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Where is this old weirdo?’

‘North Edinburgh. I’ll email you the details. You know anyone out there?’

Alyson laughed humourlessly. ‘Actually, I do. A community sergeant who works out that way. And he owes me. Owes me big.’

They pulled up to the house and Alyson drew a long breath before she pushed the car door open and stepped onto the kerb.

It was Mrs Bradley who answered when they knocked, though she barely looked to see who she was opening the door to. She was in the same semi-catatonic state she’d been in each time Alyson had seen her. Mrs Bradley shuffled back along the hall. Alyson allowed Duncan to go ahead of her.

Mr Bradley sat at the kitchen table. His beard was new, his trembling hands were not, as he reached out to shake Duncan’s hand. Alyson felt wretched about the initial weeks of the investigation when he had been treated as a suspect, though mercifully ruled out after an air-tight alibi, and from prints and DNA samples he freely gave.

Alyson stood in the corner of the kitchen while Duncan uttered phrases they all had come to know so well and said nothing: ‘Investigation is ongoing’, ‘pursuing several leads’, ‘working around the clock.’ She faced the floor and willed it to be over.

Mrs Bradley was sobbing in another room.