



# OUT IN THE COLD

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Gut Feeling

John tried the letterbox again. He let the flap fall, sending harsh metallic claps both inside the bare-sounding flat and all around the stairwell, knowing half the building had probably been awoken by our now-lengthy efforts.

Five seconds of silence. Ten. Nothing.

At John's request I held the flap open while he shone his torch through.

'No carpet,' he said, 'no light bulbs even; is this definitely the right address?'

I checked the message on my radio screen and confirmed it was.

'What do you think?' he said.

'You're asking me?' I laughed. He had been doing this more and more. I enjoyed the responsibility implied, though not so much the pressure that came with it.

John began rapping the butt-end of his torch against

the door. The sound was piercing, and I resisted the urge to plug my ears with my fingers.

The door to the flat behind us juddered open, the scowl on the man's face turned to apologetic surprise and the door closed over.

John was sniffing through the letterbox now.

'What *are* you doing?' I asked.

'Just checking,' he said. 'I think we're going to have to put the door in.'

'I'll get it from the car,' I said. I made my way down the stairwell, watching my feet carefully as the orange haze from the buzzing communal stair-light failed to penetrate the gloom efficiently.

*Three certainties in life*, John would say often, too often to forget he'd said it to me before. *Death, taxes, and they're always on the top floor*. Today he was right enough. He had a lot of these little sayings. I wondered if they were his, or if he'd learnt them from *his* tutor and, if so, whether I was doomed to inherit them someday.

I held the ram out to John by its crude handles, my arms shaking with the weight of it. He just gave me a trademark look and I knew I was doing the swinging.

He was squat, middle-aged and out of shape, but his shoulders were better equipped for this sort of thing than my slight frame.

I pulled the ram up to chest height and opted for the pendulum approach. If John hadn't been there, I would probably have voiced the *and-a-one, and-a-two, and-a-threeee* out loud. When I reached the count of two, fingers burst from the letterbox, tiny fingers.

‘Jesus!’ John spluttered, drawing away from the wriggling digits. He shone his light through as the hand withdrew. ‘Hello,’ he said with a small voice, ‘is your mummy or daddy there, can you get them? A wee girl,’ he said to me ‘can’t be older than three. Where’s your mummy? Can you open the door?’ John continued with the girl. She said something in reply I couldn’t hear. I crouched down next to John and saw the dark-haired girl shielding her eyes from the torchlight.

‘Can you get Mummy to come to the door, sweetheart?’ I asked.

‘Asleepin’,’ she replied.

‘Did *you* call us? Can you open the door?’

She tried and the handle turned but the door stayed shut, remaining firmly locked. ‘Do you know where the key is? Does Mummy have it?’ I asked, realising I was machine-gunning questions at the poor girl.

‘Mummy asleepin’,’ she repeated.

‘OK, honey, I need you to stand back away from the door now, can you do that?’

John gave me a nod and I lifted the ram once more. He held his hand up as I approached. ‘Do you have a dolly, a baby?’ he asked, a moment of inspiration. ‘You do? Could I meet her, could you go get her for me?’

John’s flat stop-hand turned to a go-point. I planted my feet and swung at the Yale lock and the ram battered through, taking part of the doorframe with it. The door crashed open, slammed against the wall and swung defeated on its hinge. Angry splinters jutted like fangs from the frame’s edge.

John's torch lit the dark-haired girl standing in the carpetless hall in pyjama bottoms and a grubby vest top. A grim-looking doll wearing only a blue bonnet hung from her hand. The astonished look on her face quickly dropped, as did the doll, as she began to sob. I dumped the ram and approached cautiously, trying not to frighten her any further.

The smell from the flat was stifling. Nothing specific, just general filth and neglect. I flicked my sleeve over my hand and held it to my face, something I would learn in later years to be a mistake. Experience would teach me the best way to deal with smell is to just breathe normally; the nose becomes accustomed quickly. Any efforts to avoid the stench are futile and only serve to prolong the discomfort.

'What's your name, sweetheart?' My voice came out funny from my reluctance to breathe through my nose, so 'name' sounded more like 'dame'.

I pulled her hands from her tear-streaked face, but she didn't reply. I lifted her and asked again. Her hands moved to my shoulders, holding me at arm's length, though she didn't otherwise resist. She looked at me for the first time. Her wet eyes scanned my face in the gloom. They were quickly drawn to the yellow light beaming from my radio. She ceased crying now that she had found this wondrous toy on my shoulder. I turned the radio off so she couldn't activate the emergency button and handed it to her to play with while I waited for John to search the flat with his too-small-for-the-job torch. Mine was no better and the large torch in the car hadn't been charged by whoever had used it last.

'My name's Don,' I said to her, 'and that funny man over there is John. What's your name?'

‘Carly,’ she said, more to the radio than to me.

‘That’s a pretty name. Where’s your phone?’ I was still hoping that this was to turn out as nine out of ten dropped calls did; an accidental or mischievous dialling of treble-nine, resulting in some finger wagging and corrective advice. This hope was growing thinner with every passing second.

‘Mummy’s room.’

‘Is Mummy there too, can you show us?’ I asked. She pointed down the hall where John’s torchlight bobbed and spun.

‘John, she’s going to show us,’ I called.

Carly pointed to the furthest away door, closed over.

‘Better stay there,’ said John. I nodded and began asking Carly about her nursery. Apparently her teacher was Miss McPake, and she was nice. She had yellow hair, and a blue car.

John returned to the hall. I raised my torch to see him shaking his head, a foreboding expression on his face. Mummy wasn’t asleepin’.

John riffled through the contents of a purple purse he had found, looking for the woman’s details. He reached for his radio, giving our call sign. Control acknowledged and I carried Carly back down the hall. She didn’t need to hear what John had to say.

As we passed back along the hallway Carly tugged on the collar of my stab vest. ‘Baby,’ she said. I looked around the floor and spotted the dropped doll and handed it to her, swapping it for the return of my radio. I turned it back on and inserted my earpiece. John was passing the grim news.

‘That’s confirmed, Control, no suspicious circumstances, door was locked from the inside, no signs of struggle, no wounds.’

‘That’s received, Echo-Three-Three, I’ll update supervisors. Do you require detectives?’

‘Negative, I’ll email them the incident for the morning meeting. Can you just confirm Social Services are en route? Oh, and we’ll need a joiner to re-secure a wooden door.’

‘Roger, Three-Three.’

Carly fell asleep in the car once it had warmed up. I had coddled her in my uniform fleece jacket and she was snoring gently. John had dabbed at her face with a sanitation wipe from the first-aid box, only succeeding in making her look grubbier with the streaks of clean skin standing out in contrasting hue to the rest.

‘What did you find?’ I asked John, now that I safely could.

‘The mother in bed, stiff and cold. Some pill bottles and charred foil.’

‘Such a shame,’ I said.

‘Shame? Selfish fucking wretch you mean.’ This took me a little by surprise, and not just because of the sudden raising of his voice; it really wasn’t like John. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I just don’t get how someone could do that.’ He turned to look at Carly. She hadn’t stirred. John had a daughter of his own. I’d never met her, but he talked about her often and with obvious pride. She was studying to be a nurse and was only four years younger than me.

‘Do you think she made the call?’ I asked.



‘The girl? Must have. Mum’s been dead a while, at least a day.’

‘What will happen to her?’ I said, sending a nod towards the sleeping girl.

‘I’m not sure,’ said John, still looking at her. ‘If there’s no family to take her she’ll be placed with a foster family; if she’s really lucky, adopted.’

‘And what if she’s not lucky?’

John considered this for a moment. ‘She’ll be passed pillar to post between foster homes and institutions for her entire childhood. God only knows what she’ll be when she comes out the other end.’

There was a period of silence as we both digested this. I wished dearly that I hadn’t asked.

Everyone then seemed to arrive at once: the undertakers in their dark blue private ambulance, the joiner in his white van and a social worker looking bleary-eyed, clearly on call and asleep when they had summoned her. The priority was to get Carly out. Seeing your mother being removed in a black body bag is the kind of thing you can’t unsee. John stood with the social worker, passing on as many details as he had been able to glean from the purse. I lifted Carly carefully, trying not to wake her, and brought her over. John was being told that neither Carly nor her mother were known to social work, which horrified me. I didn’t comment; I didn’t want to sound like I was attacking the social worker personally. It wasn’t her fault the system had failed here. She was a middle-aged woman with a kind face, a useful advantage in her job, I guessed. I handed the half-sleeping girl over.

Her small fist was again gripping the edge of my vest and she began to moan as I carefully prised her fingers. As I walked away, she began to cry, understanding dawning on her perhaps. My heart was breaking and the urge to return to her was overwhelming.

‘Baby,’ she called, her voice and lower lip trembling.

*Oh shit*, I thought and went to the car to retrieve her doll. I passed it to her and couldn’t resist tucking a dark curl around her ear. I exchanged sympathetic smiles with the social worker.

Carly seemed to settle briefly, until the social worker began buckling her into a child seat in her car. I joined John, who was helping the undertakers remove equipment from their vehicle.

‘Baby,’ I could hear Carly screaming in the background. The social worker must have had to remove her doll to properly secure her in her seat. We waited until they had driven off before traipsing back to the flat, the five of us each lugging something necessary up the stairs. I had the body bag.

The two heavy-set undertakers were impressively dressed in black suits and equally sombre ties – impressive given that it was four in the morning and nobody would have blamed them for turning up in jeans. They hadn’t brought a torch, clearly unaccustomed to having to do their job in a house without light bulbs. The torch the joiner had was no better than ours. Still, between us we managed to manoeuvre a stretcher into the bedroom.

She lay naked on her front, underneath a heavy half-pulled-back quilt.

She was, mercifully, facing away from me. Her arms were

up above her head and must have been hugging the pillow her head had been resting on before John had removed it.

John double-checked the body with the aid of the extra torches.

I looked away as he checked for sexual injury.

I was still getting used to bodies and John hadn't yet put me in a lead position for this type of call. I knew I would be able to deal with it when I had to, but while I *didn't* have to, I took advantage.

Carly's mum was a large woman, twenty-eight according to her driving licence, though you'd have guessed older. The roots of her brilliant-blonde hair showed that she shared her daughter's natural colour and she sported an array of, frankly, grotesque tattoos: Tweety-Bird looking like he had walked into a hall of mirrors on one shoulder, 'Carly' written in a swirly font on a forearm, and 'Ewan' etched across a garish pink heart on her shoulder. The girl's dad perhaps; and where the hell was he?

The smell in the room was a concentrated version of the rest of the house. Massive piles of dirty clothing lay against one wall like a fabric snowdrift. Used dishes were stacked beside the bed, and coffee cups acting as Petri dishes lay mingled between empty vodka bottles and glasses.

There was a smell coming from the body too. Not of decomposing flesh, not yet, more like a smell from a butcher's shop. No longer a human odour, just meat.

The smell didn't seem to bother anyone else. They simply set about their tasks as if this was the most natural, pedestrian thing in the world. Perhaps, for them, it was.

I began noting down the long names on the labels of

the pill bottles before bagging them. John assisted the undertakers in wrapping Carly's mum in the sheet she lay on. *Clever*, I thought, that wouldn't have occurred to me. It meant they could lift her easily while I slid the open body bag underneath and not have to touch her too much.

It was decided that the stretcher would only make things more difficult in the tight turns of the flat. The undertakers lifted her shoulders while I took hold of her feet and led the way, with John making a path with the torch.

My stomach lurched as we left the room. It took me by surprise. As much as the smell was unpleasant, it was unusual for it to induce a gag reflex. I hid it, or did my best to, and the others didn't seem to notice. If they had I would certainly have been subjected to well-meaning, but nevertheless tiresome, ridicule.

The joiner was finishing replacing the lock and drilling screws into the edge of the door frame to undo the damage I had done to it as we passed him.

'Always the top floor eh,' he said to John, as we started down the stairs.

'Three certainties in life . . .' I could hear John beginning.

We waited in the car for the joiner to finish. We would meet the others at the hospital morgue to book the body through once we had finished at the scene.

It was agreed I would write the report, or rather John told me I would. I was trying to recall all the information needed to complete it, hoping I wouldn't have to ask him later.

A vague pain was niggling at my lower stomach, either from the earlier lurch or from nightshifts generally, I

thought. They played havoc with my system. Some of my colleagues, John included, could consume an entire evening meal at three or four in the morning, unthinkable to me.

A tap at the window startled me. The joiner passed in two sets of keys and John gave him a piece of paper with the incident number and we said our farewells. John wound his seat back to as horizontal a position as it would allow. He would get twenty minutes' sleep as I drove to the hospital, again something some of the team could do, but I could not.

I unhooked the keys from the antenna of my radio and immediately dropped them as my stomach twisted into spasm.

'You OK?' asked John, rolling his head towards me, his arms crossed on his chest, ready to nod off.

'Fine,' I lied. I fished the keys from the dirty floor under the pedals. The ache in my gut was constant, a film of sweat was creeping over me. I arched my back, trying to shift it and slipped the key into the ignition before another wave of shooting nausea and agony overcame me. I tried to stop the pain leaving me audibly, grinding my teeth and clenching my fists around the wheel, but a grunt escaped.

'You want me to drive?'

'I'm fine,' I said again, with depleting plausibility.

'You probably just need to fart,' said John, lying back again, eyes closed. 'It happens to me on the nightshift sometimes. Let her rip, just crack a window.' I smiled, and got the car started, taking advantage of a short reprieve. I punched the gearstick into first and set off tentatively. I reached the end of the street without further cramps, and I put my foot down with more confidence.

I had just shifted into third when my stomach pitched once more. The pain that then flooded my abdomen made the other spasms feel utterly insignificant. In my panic I must have stamped on the brake. I shot forward, doubling over at a perfect height for the top of the wheel to connect with the bridge of my nose.

I felt it break. Not with a snap, but with a crunch. Light flooded my eyes as the two areas of pain waged a vicious war.

Blood was dripping into my cupped hands and John was saying something, but I didn't hear. I needed to get back to that bedroom.

I don't recall turning the engine off or applying the handbrake as I fled the car. I vaguely remember John calling after me, and the taste of blood. I do remember running, and the banging of doors, and the fishing of keys.

I entered the flat and immediately realised I had forgotten a torch. I fished my phone from my pocket and selected the torch function, which would deplete the battery in minutes. Some part of me expected to see Carly's mother when I reached the room, but I found only an empty bed, my mind painting a residual image of the woman as I'd just seen her.

I swept the light from the phone around the room and began tentatively kicking over piles of clothes and boxes. I reached the clothing, piled high on the far wall and my stomach churned.

I held the light high and began to remove items onto the bed, the odd drip from my still-bleeding nose falling onto them.

The snowdrift turned out to be more of a light dusting, I realised, as my hand hit something solid. I cleared a large blanket from the pile and was faced with thin wooden bars.

A child's cot.

I cleared the remaining garments from around it and raised the phone over the top.

He was eighteen months old, I would later learn. His name was Ewan, I knew even then.

The child's eyes were open, staring straight up. The sleeve and shoulder of his Babygro were thick with white vomit, long dried.

I could hear John wheezing from the hall, approaching.

My hand shook as I reached into the cot. I placed the back of my fingers on the boy's face expecting cold confirmation. But he was warm, hot even.

His eyes rolled towards me and I laughed. I'm not sure why.