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PETER LAWS

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## CHAPTER ONE

The milk van moved quietly through the streets, or rather it trundled. Yeah, that was a better word, Phil Pepper thought to himself. My little milk van *trundles* along, morning after morning, dark hour after dark hour. Weaving a silent, gentle circuit through the cold and sleeping suburbs of Totternhoe, West Hertfordshire.

It was a March morning, at 5 a.m. That wonderful, sacred time, when all is quiet. The Sandman Milk Company had committed itself to keeping it that way. They were famous for their award-winning, low-noise guarantee, with a promise painted on the side of every van.

*The first you'll hear of our milk is when it sloshes into your cornflakes!*

It's why he wore special shoes with soft rubber soles, and why they had a whisper-only worker policy, and why all the metal baskets in the back were lined with specially made cotton buffers so the bottles

didn't clink. And, of course, why the vans had electric, golf cart engines. Pretty crappy if you were trying to outrun a snapping pit bull, but quiet enough to do what the family company had prided itself on for nearly ninety years. It let the people sleep. Phil admired that goal, right from the start. When he did the rounds with his dad, who did it with *his* dad, before that. Because just as breakfast really mattered (ask your doctor), sleep mattered more. Without rest, people didn't function right, and more importantly, they couldn't dream.

So Phil made a hushed turn into Lowry Terrace. Then a graceful right onto Gibson Avenue, and a sharp, silent three-point turn into Felling Road. Which is where his smile vanished. He knew it would, because this was the road that he always drove straight through. Not a single customer on the longest street in town. And every year, who was he kidding, every *month*, streets like this were becoming the norm.

Back in the '80s, he and his dad would've stopped at pretty much every house. There was a whole fleet of quiet little trundlers back then. An army of white coats, tiptoeing a silent pavement ballet, tipping hats at one another from across the street. These days, however, Phil was in his mid-fifties, and he'd often deliver one single milk order to an entire hundred-home street. Some streets he'd drive past completely – like Felling. People preferred to stock up with hefty, plastic six-pinters, beamed straight from the mouse clicker to the supermarket to the doorstep . . . along with every other food-based wonder known to humanity. No wonder the Sandman Milk Company had dropped from twenty vans to two over three decades. And for the last six months, they'd reached one – which was Phil: the Last of the Milkicans, he'd joke. Though he was yet to laugh when he said it. Pretty soon it'd be no van at all and then, he supposed, perfect silence would finally be achieved.

He whispered to his melancholy. Told it to 'Shhhh', because he was finally coming up to Pendle Street. Hallelujah, Praise Jesus on a moped, *this* was more like it. He had seven customers along here,

and two of them were brand new. They'd signed up last month after his solo door-knocking campaign. He'd hated doing it, because it reeked of charity, but his wife's nag had been worth it. Two new customers! Maybe folks were getting sick of big business. Sick of using plastic and killing the little fishies. If vinyl bloody records could make a baffling comeback, why not nice-cold, ice-cold milk?

So he drove down his street of hope and parked by the postbox. He slid out through the doorless gap and let his soft-tread soles kiss the pavement good morning. He tugged his white coat into place and tapped his white peaked cap too. Just for the hell of it. So what if he looked like a relic. So what if an early morning jogger once gasped loudly at him, honestly believing that Phil was a wandering ghost from the 1950s. Legend says he roams the streets, searching for new customers! He allowed himself a silent laugh.

He did number 78 first. The Hakeems. Two semi-skimmed and an orange juice. He set the bottles down on the doorstep and gave a gentle, friendly tip of the cap to the window above. Mr and Mrs Hakeem would be warm under their duvet right now. Faces and lips pressed against marshmallow pillows.

*Dream on, my friends,* he smiled, *dream on.*

Back at the van, he grabbed the next crate. His heart sank a little.

The Bensons lived at Number 81, just across the road. Mr Benson was a grumpy old goat, who was *not* impressed when his wife signed up for a delivery last week. He remembered how Mr Benson shouted at her, when the door closed. Not a nice man, by all accounts. Maybe he just needed more sleep.

So Phil moved towards the front door and very gently set four pints of milk and two choco-milks down. He leant over and turned the bottle facing out, just like his dad always did.

Then, somebody laughed.

Phil paused with a finger on the last bottle, his other hand dangled like a mannequin.

*Oh? The Bensons are up earlier than—*

Again, somebody laughed. Muffled and quiet. It wasn't coming from the house.

He stood up straight and turned, soft soles revolving. A dirty greenhouse came into view, just near the pavement. As soon as he stopped turning, the laughter came again. But this time the giggle felt different. It was a giggle *against* something. A laugh into the hand. He pictured Mr Benson in there, ready to come striding out to hit him with a plant pot. He'd had crazy customers before.

Time to leave. He took a hasty step towards the path. There were other, kinder people to serve after all, and Weetabix tastes like chunks of cardboard without a fresh bottle of—

*'Help . . . help me . . .'*

He froze.

That voice . . . no way was that Mr Benson. Was that a *kid* in there?

*'Pleaaaaassssse . . .'*

Heart rate rising, Phil took a step towards the greenhouse door. Then another. He whispered, 'Hello?'

Another giggle, followed by words that weren't the type you'd normally giggle about. *'Help . . . help . . .'*

What if that wasn't laughter? What if the poor little tyke was crying in there? One of the Benson kids maybe. Maybe daddy was easy with his fists, and this was where his kids liked to hide. Especially when he was so furious at all this overpriced choco-milk.

Phil gently set his empty basket down and curled a finger around the cold handle. It was way too dark to see through the grimy glass, so he pulled at the metal-framed door. Just one tug brought the whole thing gliding open in a helpfully silent, recently oiled arc. Phil leant his head into the gloom inside, jaw tight, every filling touching. He couldn't see anybody, just shadows.

'Where are you?' He stepped inside and winced at the smell. He had no clue what alien vegetable was rotting in there, but holy

smokes, something absolutely *stank*. He saw a tall, long, metal shelving unit on his left, rammed with pots and tools and a hanging piece of tarpaulin. There was a low wooden table on his right, too. It was filled with herbs sprouting from plastic pots and . . . carrots. Jeez-Louise. There were *stacks* of carrots, caked with soil.

*'Come here . . .'*

The voice, closer now, sent ice sliding down his spine, and he span back to see the greenhouse door. The spring hinges had already closed it. So silently that he hadn't noticed.

*'Come here . . .'* the voice said. *'Down . . . here . . .'*

He squinted towards a low metal shelf where a dark roll of plastic sheeting was hanging from the third shelf, draped down across the second like a curtain. And he knew immediately that this was where the hidden giggler lay.

*'Hey . . .'* he whispered. *'Are you okay?'*

*'Help me out . . . Pleaaaaassse . . .'*

Crikey, that was a kid.

He dropped to his knees and slowly reached for the sheet, fingers trembling like they had on his wedding day. Getting closer. Take a breath, Phil. Do the right thing. Almost there.

He snapped his hand back.

*Yuk.*

There were slugs crawling around the hem of the canvas. Four of them, all bunched up and wriggling together. Then he stroked his throat with a grimace as he watched a very strange thing occur. The slugs started to move in time with one another, and they were working together, tugging at the canvas so it might silently slide down. It did, and quickly too.

*Fffffffffffffffffff.*

It fell into a heap on the floor, and behind it Phil could see something now visible that both relieved and devastated him, all at once.

The crying voice was real. Not a ghost, not a clever carrot, but what looked like a naked teenage girl, bunched up and lying on her side on the second to bottom shelf. Her long black hair hung from the edge and her dirty slug fingers were now wriggling across her kneecaps, hugging them towards herself, head folded in. He couldn't see her other hand.

'Bloody Nora . . .' he said, oblivious to his breaking the no-whisper policy.

She was a knee-hugging ball. He thought of kids shouting 'Geronimo!' when they leapt into a swimming pool, but then thought she was more like a giant embryo instead. Because the closer he got, the more he saw her glisten with some sort of gloop. Sweat?

Under all that wet, bedraggled black hair, he saw her other hand. She had it splayed, wide across her face. The way he used to play peek-a-boo with his daughter in the park. He was so taken aback by this, the splayed hand, that it took him a few seconds to realise that this shivering, wet, Geronimo ball was already growing bigger. It was unfurling.

He couldn't move, and he couldn't speak or even whisper, either. He just took off his hat like a hearse was passing by, and he stared at this bizarre ball of limbs flowering. He whispered, in his kindest, most gentle voice, 'I'm gonna put you on my milk float. I'm gonna get you some help . . .'

His absolute best guess was that he'd stumbled onto Mr Benson's prisoner child. Like those reports he'd seen of young girls kidnapped and stuffed into cellars for decades. And Phil even had time to picture himself on the BBC News tonight. The silent, cautious milkman who sneaked a kid to safety, and kick-started a nationwide turn back to doorstep milk deliveries – the hero's option!

Until one skinny leg splayed out, then another, and he saw something that didn't compute. Those legs were bizarrely long for a young teen. Like this was one of those Russian contortionists

who could dislocate their bodies just to fit inside a tiny box. The head was still down, with that hair-strewn hand still clawed across it, but the other arm started peeling away from her knees. The arm folded jaggedly outwards. His brain pretended he could hear pencils snapping, but he knew. His ears were filling with the audible cracking and grinding of bones.

All this hypnotism stopped when the bare foot hit. It made a steady slap on the concrete floor. That's when Phil blinked, because the foot had hair on it. And that shoe size was almost as big as his own. With the body still on the shelf, the other foot slapped next to the first, and Phil's gaze rolled up that long, freakishly long leg, to see the blossoming of a crotch, covered in sticky pubic gloop. Then something else that made him dizzy again. This wasn't a little teen after all, and it certainly wasn't a girl. This was a skinny man, half-covered in blood, who had a terrifying ability to fit into tight places.

One long arm lolled out and started grasping.

Phil went to run, but he couldn't. Because when he looked down, his wrist was locked inside those slippery, blood-soaked slug-fingers, whose touch had flung his entire body to the coldest peaks of Everest. All he could do was yelp and yank himself free, while this thing, gripping something at last, finally started to fully uncoil. The other hand, the one under all that hair, finally pulled away, and Phil now saw a face – though he dearly wished he couldn't. It was still at an angle, pushing through the black strands. A brow, and a pair of eyes slid through the doorway of the wet fringe, and he saw the grimacing thing being born. A cheek slid and stretched along the shelf towards the edge, and he thought he even saw one tooth, grinding a line in the metal. His first thought had been correct. He hadn't heard whimpering or crying at all. The skinny man was giggling *like* a child. He could hear the cold air of laughter, fizzing through the dry lips.

It was the first time Phil made any real, unrestricted noise.

He wailed loudly, and then he slammed himself back against the wooden table, yanking his clamped wrist as hard as he could. All that did was drag the naked man fully out, so that his horribly long body slid free and dropped. It slapped onto its side on the floor, with a nauseating, stomach-turning crunch. A man-sized beetle, with its limbs flailing out quickly, grabbing the world for balance. Phil's jawbone lost all strength when the strange skinny man pulled himself into an upright position. Now fully open, Phil saw everything, but it was the man's stomach, just beneath his belly button, that held the real horror. The most furious cuts and gashes he'd ever seen. Like a tyre mark, like a pattern, like a . . .

A word.

He saw a word, *carved* into this man's pulsing stomach. A wound-word that even now was pumping out fresh fuel for what was becoming a growing, sticky lake on the greenhouse floor. Phil looked up at the ceiling in panic. The morning sunlight was finally seeping through the grime. When he looked back he saw the man *staring* at him. Eyes filled with desperate fear, even as he enthusiastically tugged at the ragged word in his belly and laughed.

*'Let me out . . .'* the man mumbled. *'Let me . . . out . . .'*

*'Who are you?'*

*'I . . . I roam the earth . . . One. Three. Three.'*

*'You want me to call someone?'*

*'Three. One.'*

*'Do you like orange juice? It's fresh?'*

*'Six. Six. Six. Six.'*

*'I'll—'*

*'One. Three. Three . . . hushhhhh little baby, don't say a word . . .'*

The man's teeth suddenly snapped at the air, and the lips peeled back in an awful, bony smile. *'Open your mouth, friend . . .'*

*'Why?'*

*'Cos, I'm gonna climb in.'*

