

# CHAPTER 1

The Cleveland Nature Reserve was a cluster of lakes situated between Cirencester to the north and Swindon to the south. The reserve was just a small section of the Cotswolds Water Park which consisted of hundreds of lakes with fishing sites and water sports, intercut with cycle paths, farms and walking routes. Home to thousands of species of flora and fauna, it was only marred by the presence of the occasional, unexpected area of quicksand – proving that even the most beautiful things could hide a more dangerous side.

Jamie and Mark often cycled along Spine Road which, as the name might suggest, ran through the centre of this cluster of lakes. They'd go fishing, watch the people on jet skis and beg free cans of pop from the Waterside Café. But today, they were distracted by a strange sight in one of the lakes: dozens of crows on the surface of the water! The brothers, aged 12 and 13, didn't know much about biology, but they did know that crows could not land on water. Each time the wind blew tiny waves across whatever they were standing on, the birds panicked for a second and created a cloud of black wings all flapping at the same time. But they didn't fly away; something was keeping them there, in the middle of the lake, on their strange, out-of-place platform.

Twenty minutes later, Jamie and Mark had cycled round to a small rowboat that they'd hidden many months ago, tied to the low, overhanging branches of an old tree. They slid it into the water and set off. Mark, being older and stronger, always did the rowing.

As they got closer to the mass of birds, it became clear that the crows were standing on the roof of a horsebox, most of which sat

just above the surface of the water, by no more than an inch. They began to shriek and flap in a unified show of force, endeavouring to keep their prize – whatever it was. The boys could now see that birds were focussing their attention on a tear in the metal roof, about six inches in diameter.

‘Climb up then,’ Mark instructed. Then he swung one of the oars through the air and the crows flew away in all directions, creating such a foul-smelling down-draught as they went, that the boys screwed up their faces and held their noses. Jamie thought he was going to puke and said he didn’t want to climb on top.

‘I’m scared it’s gonna sink!’

‘Don’t be daft,’ Mark said. ‘It must already be sitting on the bottom, so it can’t possibly sink any further.’

Reluctantly Jamie removed his T-shirt and tied it round his face like a mask then tentatively climbed onto the roof. He shuffled towards the six-inch hole, trying to keep his balance as the roof began to wobble, and peered down into the pitch-dark water.

‘Nah, there’s nothing,’ Jamie quickly decided, desperate to get back to dry land or at least into the rowboat. But Mark wasn’t prepared to give up that easily.

‘Push it with your foot and make the hole bigger,’ he said. Above them, the crows circled and cawed angrily.

Jamie pushed his toe into the hole, trying vainly not to get his trainers wet. Egged on by his brother, he began stamping down as hard as he dared on the ripped edge of the horsebox. Finally, it gave way by another inch or two, sending a bubble of old, trapped air up into Jamie’s face. The stench was so rancid, that Jamie immediately bent over and puked into the lake, while his foot slipped through the hole filling his trainer with filthy water.

Mark started laughing, But Jamie did not see the funny side. ‘I only just got these trainers for my birthday! I’m coming back . . . this is stupid!’

‘You’re wet now,’ Mark giggled. ‘Stamp on it, go on. Make the hole big enough to see inside. Go on, Jamie! Don’t be a baby!’ Mark knew exactly what to say to rile his younger brother.

Jamie angrily started jumping up and down on the roof of the horsebox, splashing Mark in the process. They were both soaked now, but it didn’t matter – despite the horrible smell, they were having fun.

With each jump, Jamie brought his knees up to his chest, getting as much height as he could. And each time he landed, the hole opened up a little more. Until, with one jump too many, the roof finally split completely and gave way beneath his weight.

To Mark’s horror, Jamie disappeared beneath the surface and into the submerged horsebox.

The next five seconds seemed to last forever. Not knowing what else to do, Mark held his breath, as though he too was underwater. Finally, Jamie bobbed back up, gasping and slapping the surface of the water with his palms. He snatched at the air, trying to find the oar being waved above his head until Mark managed to guide it into his hands, pulling his little brother to the wall of the horsebox. Jamie draped his armpits over the top of the wall, wiped his face and gradually let the wonderful realisation that he wasn’t going to die sink in.

Mark was as white as a sheet, as the thought of what could have been spun round in his head. But Jamie, knowing that he’d now earned enough cool points to last a lifetime, began to laugh and this finally gave Mark permission to relax. The boys grinned at each other then started laughing hysterically – until Mark’s expression suddenly changed when something broke the surface of the water behind his brother.



Mark couldn't see what it was at first, but gradually the thing bobbing about, just inches away from the back of Jamie's head, turned and twisted in the water until it was suddenly, sickeningly, recognisable. The human skull didn't have much flesh attached, but it was enough to drive the carrion crows crazy as they wheeled about in the sky above, so near and yet so far away from such a tempting feast.

'Jamie . . .' The serious tone in Mark's voice made Jamie stop laughing and pay attention. 'Grab the oar. I'll pull you over the side, then you swim to the boat.' The old, rotted corpse bobbed back and forth as Jamie kicked his legs, and then he jerked as he felt something cold and slimy brushing against him. Feeling suddenly sick again, he turned his head to see what it was.

Jamie's scream was loud enough to finally scatter the crows from the sky.

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After solving the Rose Cottage murder, whilst also bringing to a close the investigation into biggest train robbery ever seen in the UK, Detective Sergeant Jack Warr's reputation for doggedly following his instincts, regardless of how dubious that course of action seemed to everyone else, was known and respected throughout the Met. He was the detective who assessed people quickly and read them accurately; he could be hands-off one minute, and in-your-face the next; but he always seemed to know how to find out if you had anything to hide. Above all, he was uncannily adept at predicting what criminals were going to do. It was almost as though he could think like them.

His boss, DCI Simon Ridley, known to be one of the most anal men on the force, continued to be the perfect counterbalance



for Jack's gut instinct and, together, they now made a formidable team. Jack was exactly the type of intuitive officer that the Wimbledon Prowler case needed. Above all, the Wimbledon Prowler case seemed to simply need a fresh pair of eyes. And Jack's eyes were particularly attuned to finding the right detail, at the right time, in the most unlikely of places. So DS Jack Warr was sent on loan to Wimbledon.

Through the summer months, the Wimbledon Prowler brazenly walked the streets with a tennis racquet in his hand, blending in with a thousand other part-time sports fans. And in the winter months, he hired a mobility scooter and moved freely around the Common being ignored by everyone because no one wants to get caught staring at a disabled person. Two disguises allowing him to hide in plain sight, so that any CCTV that did happen to capture him would not provide the police with an accurate description of 'their man'. He was smart, bold and arrogant. He knew how people behaved. And he knew how to manipulate them. So, for five years, the Wimbledon Prowler evaded the police and all of their endeavours to catch him. The case had gone stale.

Between 2016 and 2021, the Wimbledon Prowler systematically terrorised this area of South-West London. Sometimes there were months in between burglaries, but DS Richard Stanford always recognised the MO within a minute of entering any targeted house and could separate the Prowler's burglaries from any others.

'When you walk into a burgled property,' he would say, 'you can tell who's done it quick enough. Some sneak in whilst the family sleeps, showing off how bold they are; some break in when the house is empty. Some cause as much damage as possible, to make evidence collection and fingerprinting a nightmare. Look in the fridge – if the food's gone, we know it's likely to be Jacko. Big Tony nicks kids' toys for himself, along with small electronic items that



are easy to sell on for a tenner a pop. Some villains go straight for the car keys. Some focus on jewellery, meaning they've probably already got a fence lined up. And if the house looks like it's not been burgled at all, apart from an attic window being forced . . . then we know it's more than likely to be the Wimbledon Prowler.'

The Prowler's MO was to target houses where the roof was accessible via a lower extension, and people who owned a cat. When the owners were out, he'd enter through an attic window, as they were rarely-to-never attached to the security system. And all internal alarms would normally be off to allow the cat to move freely around the home. Once inside, he'd disarm the security system and eventually leave via the back door. Sometimes he got it wrong, of course. Sometimes the attic window was alarmed. Sometimes the cat was confined to the downstairs, so the upstairs sensors were active, but he'd discover that within seconds and manage to escape via a door before the police got close. DS Stanford's biggest problem was that the Prowler was patient. He could go months without burgling. Which meant he could easily fall off the police radar and his escapades just be added to the growing pile of unsolved crimes.

The first thing Jack did after getting up to speed with the Prowler case, was call a retired detective constable called Mike Haskin – the man who'd spent three weeks chasing down the Alley Burglar back in 1995, to tell him what he could remember . . .

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*After three weeks of sitting on gravelled rooftops and behind thorny bushes, DC Mike Haskin's team was tired, cold, pissed off and the laughing stock of the station. But they followed him regardless, because they were certain that he was right.*



*Mike had returned to each of the burgled premises and interviewed the owners for himself, learning along the way that, as well as the twelve burglaries they knew about, another seventeen had gone unreported. This was down to the fact that this working-class community did not believe for one second that the police were capable of finding their own arse with both hands – let alone finding a burglar who had already evaded them for several months.*

*Tonight, Mike's team were just forty-eight hours away from having the plug pulled on the investigation – something they would never live down. The Alley Burglar was now just two days away from getting a free pass by having his escapades scaled right down from a full-on surveillance op to a distant memory.*

*The target zone was in lockdown, with a covert officer on every possible ground exit. They knew the footprint of his target zone but had no intention of going in after him – his nickname of Alley Burglar was well earnt. The vast expanse of shops and residential properties gave him far too many unlit escape routes, places to hide and short-cuts to take.*

*It was the 'rat in a maze' principle – if you follow the suspect into the maze, you'll get lost; so, you tactically cover all exits because, eventually, the suspect has to come out.*

*With rooftop vantage points and ground-level runners ready for their moment in the spotlight, Mike was confident this time they'd get their man. He had to be. He was running out of time.*

*Mike's team were all using basic-issue radios, meaning that their communications were competing with every other officer's on duty that night, and 'radio silence' was impossible. So, the volume was turned down on everyone's handset until the second the chase was on. They needed to be invisible and silent.*

*The rooftop lookouts were so far away from background noise such as traffic and footfall that every crinkle of their jackets could*

*be heard in the surrounding silence. This meant hours of sitting in exactly the same position in the hope that, when the time came, they'd still be able to move their legs and run.*

*Operation Midnight progressed through its first week and into its second. Then at 3 a.m., on the final night of the longest stakeout Mike had ever been in charge of . . . it happened. As the metallic noise echoed round the empty streets, it was impossible to work out where it was coming from, so the team stayed put. And listened. Their minds filled in the blanks as they each tried to figure out what they were hearing and which direction it was coming from – the consensus being that someone was standing on a dustbin and scrabbling up hard guttering.*

*Mike's heart was beating out of his chest as he stretched his cold, seized-up leg muscles, getting ready for action. 'All units stand by, stand by. Radio silence.' His eyes scanned the darkness as he listened and his brain automatically filtered out the sound of foxes feeding, rats foraging and the homeless turning over in their sleeping bags – so that all that was left was the sound of his burglar creeping around his well-trodden rat-run.*

*Then there was an almighty crash, forcing Mike to instruct his men to go overt: torches went on, and everyone came out of hiding and raced towards the noise, while black-clad police officers looking like ninjas scrambled across rooftops.*

*Beneath them, their burglar was on the run. The officers covering the ground exits resisted the instinct to close in and help; instead they held their positions and waited for the perp to come to them. Radios burst into life with a running commentary of street names and compass directions. Occasionally, Mike heard the words 'lost him, lost him' but they were quickly followed by 'chasing suspect, chasing suspect' as another officer took up the pursuit. It was thrilling and excruciating at the same time. Mike wasn't near the actual*





*chase; he was on one of the exits with a couple of his men, willing the burglar to come his way so he could be the one who physically caught their man. But then he heard 'suspect detained' And it was all over.*

*Every officer now left their position and headed for the rendezvous point, all wanting to see who they'd spent three and a half weeks hunting. In the back of an area car sat a small, wet, dirty man, hands cuffed behind his back. He smelt of beer and BO and, as Mike shone a torch in through the window, he could see that the man was crying. He figured he was a druggie, stealing to feed his habit. He'd targeted a working-class area because it meant that there'd be no alarm systems to bypass. He was a nobody who would not be missed.*

*Many officers would have seen this man as small-fry, almost harmless, but looking at him Mike knew the truth: when a person commits crime for fun, they can take it or leave it; but when a person commits crime because their life depends on it, they can become killers in the blink of eye. If you don't catch them in time, they can be the ones you read about in the news.*

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Ridley had attended Mike Haskin's retirement party some months earlier and had spoken so highly of Mike's dogged determination and unwavering self-belief, that Jack had remembered his name. Ridley had even mentioned the Alley Burglar case, explaining how Mike had stuck to his guns, even when his DI had lost faith in him. If Ridley had taught Jack anything over the years, it was to respect the talents of others and to be humble enough to surround himself with exceptional officers who shone in the areas that he did not. Ridley had wanted Jack on his team for this very reason, and now Jack wanted Mike on his.



DS Richard Stanford was personally grateful for their help on the Wimbledon Prowler investigation, but unlike Mike Haskin, he had struggled with the silent derision from others on the force because he hadn't yet got his man. He knew it should be water off a duck's back, but, for some reason, it cut deep. The Wimbledon Prowler case was becoming the bane of his life and, worse, he'd lost the enthusiasm of his men. On one occasion, a cocky little PC by the name of Denny McGinty had loudly fake-yawned during a morning briefing and Stanford had gone ballistic in frustration and embarrassment. That was the moment that his boss had called Ridley, and Ridley had called Jack.

Jack Warr and Mike Haskin sat quietly and patiently in front of Stanford as he laboriously laid out all of the details of the investigation. It was clear he'd done nothing wrong as such, he'd just lacked imagination and the ability to step outside the rather sterile and restrictive box of police procedure and into the dirtier, messier world of the career criminal.

'Sir ...' Jack interrupted during one of Stanford's pauses for breath. 'Mike has been where you are, and he got his man. Now, he's going to help us get yours.' Jack smiled, making sure that his deep brown eyes smiled too. 'When going forwards isn't working, go back.' For the first time since they'd arrived, Stanford dared to relax and sit down.

For the next two hours, Stanford gave Mike the floor and he talked them through the Alley Burglar case. Stanford made copious notes, highlighting potential new approaches. Mike drew a map showing where all of the burglaries in his operation had occurred and, by the time he'd finished, a familiar fish-shape pattern was clear to see. Mike explained what Jack and Richard were now looking at. 'The first burglary we knew about wasn't the first one he did, our second wasn't his second and so on. It was only when we caught him that

this fish-shape emerged. Our perp lived in a squat situated right in the middle of the fish-tail. His first burglary was the closest to his squat, out to the left – the top of the tail fin. His second burglary was the closest to his squat out to the right – the bottom of the tail fin. Then he went further and wider as he got ballsier, until he drew a fish across his self-selected patch. This pattern allowed us to predict roughly where his next burglary would take place . . . and that's how we caught him red-handed.'

Mike could see the fascination on Stanford's face.

'Weird, innit, Rich. But this sort of subconscious pattern is very common according to the boffins at Bramshill. They're the brains who spend their time making sense of the senseless, so I can stand here sounding clever. After we'd caught him, this pattern also allowed us to go back and find every single burglary he'd committed and do him for the lot. Your man won't be being random either, Rich.'

Jack loved that Mike, as retired Job, was able to call DS Stanford 'Rich'. It brought an informal friendliness to a situation full of tension because of the hole Stanford was in. Mike ended his stint at the evidence board with 'I'm gonna need a cuppa soon, Rich, if that's OK with you, mate'.

Energised by Mike's informal approach and easy confidence, Stanford had suddenly found a new lease of life. 'Take yourselves to the canteen and bring me back a tea, will you?' he said. Jack and Mike threw each other a quick grin. They knew that when they returned, there'd be a second fish scrawled on the evidence board.

The canteen was empty, and the cleaner was taking advantage of the fact that most coppers were out on patrol. From the doorway, Jack and Mike could see the glistening wet floor and they wondered why on earth she'd started mopping from the doorway, ending up in the corner of the room with no way out other than

back over her pristine floor. They watched in silence as she walked backwards towards the serving counter, sweeping broadly left and right, leaving the lino as clean as the day it was laid. The only marks that defeated her were the black rubber heel scuffs from police issue boots.

Then, without slowing, she dipped under the serving hatch and reappeared behind the counter. That's why she'd started mopping at the doorway, because this cleaning lady was also the serving lady.

Mike looked at Jack. His face was serious, and his expression clearly said, 'I may have been a copper for thirty years, dealing with the toughest of the tough, but there's no way I'm going to be the first one to walk on her wet floor.' So, Jack took Point, and ventured forwards. For some reason, Jack thought it best to take huge strides towards the frowning woman behind the counter, leaving behind as few dirty footprints as possible.

As they sat with two pots of tea and two full English breakfasts, they talked like old friends. 'Are you gonna be at the birth?' Mike asked, as he slurped his piping hot tea through pursed lips. 'I was there for all of mine. It's the most disgustingly fabulous thing you'll ever see.' Mike, it turned out, had six kids – 'two of each,' he joked. 'Two girls, two boys and two as-yet-unidentified. They're amazing. Have more than one, Jack. Mine fight now, 'course they do, they're still young, but it's good to know that, when me and the missus have gone, they'll have each other.'

'Maybe we'll see how we cope with one first,' Jack replied. And then, quite unlike him, Jack found himself talking about very personal things, to this relative stranger. 'We left it quite late,' he explained. 'Maggie's a doctor and, with me being Job, we always seemed to be working towards something, rather than arriving. Moving to London, her promotion, my promotion. The baby

wasn't planned, which, if I'm honest, was the only way it was ever going to happen.'

Jack smiled an unexpected smile as he recalled the moment Maggie had told him he was going to be a dad. They were on a flight to St Lucia, to collect his own dad from a cruise and bring him home to die. It wasn't a morbid memory. It was a moment that told him to live life to the full, because, all things considered, it's so very, very short.

When Mike took over the conversation again, he went into great detail about the birth of his third and Jack tried to filter out some of the more gruesome parts of the story as he was still eating. 'He was blue 'cos the cord was round his neck. I tell you, Jack, there's nothing more terrifying at the birth of your baby than silence. *Scream!* I was thinking. And he did. Then the little bugger carried on screaming for the first seven months of his life!'

Jack nodded, as if he'd been paying attention. 'When your wife was pregnant, did you . . . did you . . .' Jack searched for words that didn't make him sound like a complete bastard, but he couldn't find them. 'Did you enjoy being at work, more than being at home?' he said finally.

'I loved being at work,' Mike laughed and he could see how relieved Jack was to hear a wiser man's experience. 'We love 'em, Jack, but, fuck me, being pregnant affects a woman's senses. Fact! She can suddenly see every knife you put into the fork section, she can smell your fear when she mentions a shopping trip. Work was my sanctuary.'

After this twenty-minute breakfast session with Mike, Jack found he had spoken more about the upcoming birth of his first baby than he had in the previous eight and a half months. But then, who did he have to talk to? Ridley was his boss, not his friend; DS Laura Wade was his partner but had shown no



interest in the pregnancy at all – possibly because it drew a solid line under her fantasy of ever stealing Jack from Maggie; and DC Anik Joshi . . . well, Anik had become a bit of a dick since Jack got the Sergeant’s position instead of him. Jack’s only real friend, in fact, was Maggie. But he could hardly talk to her about how he felt like he was drowning. Which is why it had been so liberating to speak with Mike: he was a safe pair of ears, who Jack would know for a week or so, and then never see again.

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Stanford had forgotten he’d asked for a tea, so was pleasantly surprised when Jack and Mike returned with one for each of them, plus some cakes which the cleaner/serving lady had joyfully gifted to Mike once she’d discovered he was a devoted father of six. Sure enough, there was a second fish-shaped drawing on the evidence board. It sprawled across the whole of Wimbledon Common, plus all of the surrounding streets. Stanford’s target zone was now huge.

‘The CCTV for this area has been looked at a dozen times,’ Stanford was saying, eager to crack on and get the most out of Mike and Jack whilst he had them. ‘No cars or people consistently appear on the nights the burglaries took place; no one who doesn’t belong, that is. All residents and visitors have been checked and cleared.’

‘Extend the perimeter?’ Mike politely put this as a question, but it wasn’t. ‘The Common is throwing any pattern out of whack’cos, as far as potential targets go, it’s a worthless area, but as far as cover goes, it’s invaluable. So, you’ve got to extend the perimeter beyond the Common. I suppose CCTV inside the Common is a hope-in-hell, right?’



Stanford shook his head. ‘There’s no CCTV in the majority of the Common. In the summer of 2018, a wildlife survey was done, mainly around the ponds and in the deeper areas of woodland. There were some cameras placed in trees hoping to catch owls by night and kestrels by day doing their thing. We got all of that video footage, but it gave us nothing. We’ve tried, Mike, we really have. This sneaky little fucker is driving me crazy.’

Mike smiled and repeated his advice to extend the perimeter. The only advice he then added, was that Stanford should review all CCTV footage himself, because you can’t buy experience; and besides, the neck that’s on the line should be the one to do the make-or-break work. That was Mike’s philosophy and it had always served him well.

By 9 p.m., Jack, Mike and Stanford had burned up the carbs from a heavy meat feast pizza and were trying to find their third wind with slow-release energy from nuts and fruit. But it was no use. They were about to call it a day and head for the pub, when Mike piped up, ‘Who’s this guy on the mobility scooter, Rich? He’s around every day in the winter, but not the summer. Is he cutting through the Common to get somewhere? Does he live or work nearby?’

At 8 a.m. the next morning, four uniforms were working alongside Jack, Mike and Stanford, tracking the flat-cap-wearing man on a small red mobility scooter and a hooded man in tennis whites carrying a racquet case. They seemed to be the same build and, crucially, both carried an identical rucksack. One or other of these men, it turned out, was seen during the day of each burglary – but never both at the same time. Jack was certain this was the same man, using two different disguises, to hide in plain sight and recce the target house before coming back to burgle that same night.

The man, regardless of how he was dressed, behaved in a very specific manner. He would disappear into the Common and then emerge at another exit hours later. But the *final* time he emerged, whether dressed as a wannabe Nadal, or as an innocuous disabled man, was always at the Copse Hill end of the Common, where a light grey Mercedes was waiting for him. It was parked on a different street each time, always with a heavy treeline to hide the number plate from prying CCTV. But *this*, they now realised, was the centre of Stanford's fish tail – the Merc.

Nadal or Ironside, as their Prowler was now affectionately nicknamed, would stay in the Merc until the dead of night. Then, dressed in dark clothing, he'd head back into the cover of the Common. From there, he could pop out anywhere.

Stanford split his team into two. Some uniformed officers were tasked with using the date and location of each burglary to track their suspect in and out of the Common: burglary after burglary, month after month, year after year, from the Merc, to the victim's home, back to the Merc. While other officers were tasked with using backdated CCTV and Police National Computer checks – if there were any – to track the Merc in and out of London and try to establish if the car was definitely present in the capital on the night of every single burglary.

One of the uniformed officers helping Stanford now was McGinty, the fake-yawner he'd torn a strip off days earlier. Today, however, McGinty was a different man. He seemed to know his place and his role, and he was doing his job enthusiastically without question or back-chat. Mike caught Stanford watching him. 'Is he the kid that yawned at you?' Stanford's rather embarrassed look confirmed that it was. 'Get him transferred to your team, Rich. The worst trait in a police officer is apathy. That boy will give you cheek and challenges, but that can be useful.' As McGinty left the room,



he turned and gave Stanford a little nod, then he disappeared like an enthusiastic child on a mission to please a parent.

Whilst the uniforms were doing all of this arduous but vital screen work, Jack, Mike and Stanford were checking out a fish and chip shop in Manchester.

Damien Panagos was a 52-year-old, second-generation Greek immigrant, now running The Godfather in Wythenshawe with his wife and son – and the registered owner of the light grey Merc that was so often parked at the Copse Hill end of Wimbledon Common. His parents had come to the UK in the 1960s and his dad had worked as a spark, teaching his trade to young Damien. Jack speculated that this is where he'd learnt his party trick of being able to bypass the average home security system.

Stanford was chomping at the bit to head north and get Panagos arrested, but Jack slowed him down. 'We're ahead of him and he's going nowhere. Work the CCTV cameras and gather the evidence. If, while we're doing that, he heads to us, we'll nick him in the act. If he's having some down time, we'll nick him at home when we're ready. Either way, we'll nick him. And when we do, it'll be watertight.'

Stanford was given four more uniforms, so that the hours of CCTV dating back to 2014 could be viewed on a 24-hour rotation. While that was going on, Mike took Stanford and Jack to the pub. 'If all we can do is wait, we might as well wait with a pint in our hand.'

'The thing that . . . gets me,' Stanford slurred three hours later, 'is the community bloody naysayers. I mean, I get it, I do. Someone comes into your house and takes your stuff . . . that's terrible. It's like house rape, that's what it is. But, fuck me, Jack, people soon forget all the good you've done for them, just 'cos you let one little northern Greek bastard slip through your fingers.' Mike and Jack sniggered into their pints as Stanford went on. 'We'll



get this Panagos prick and they won't say "thank you", they'll say "about time". Because this one cuts deep. This one has impacted an entire community for far too long. They're scared, and that's my fault. It's not my fault, but it is my fault. I really, really appreciate you coming here. Both of you . . .' Jack took this as his cue to get Stanford home before he started telling him and Mike that he loved them.

Stanford was first in the following morning, and he was raring to go. He looked as bright as a button, as fresh as a daisy and, as long as you didn't stand too close, you'd never know that he was probably still too drunk to be at work. Jack and Stanford set off towards Manchester, where they were due to be met at 12 p.m. by DI Leticia Margate. The plan was for them all to go to The Codfather and arrest Panagos as he prepped for the lunchtime crowd. However, at 8.30 a.m., before they'd even hit the M25, Stanford got a call from DI Margate, to say that Panagos was heading south. Stanford's excitement was palpable – he was about to get the opportunity to arrest his nemesis on his own patch.

A few hours later Wimbledon Common was scattered with undercover officers disguised as dog-walkers, joggers, litter-pickers, duck-feeders, young lovers . . . all lining the pathways just waiting for a red mobility scooter to trundle past. They communicated back and forth for hours as Panagos weaved around the Common, then out into the streets, then back into the Common. After four hours, it became clear that Panagos had his sights set on one particular house on Parkside, just along from the private hospital: by early evening, the owners of this property were making no secret of packing their BMW with small suitcases for a weekend away. As expected, Panagos made his way back to his Merc parked on Copse Hill, he folded his scooter and placed it in the boot, then got into his car, made light work of a packed lunch and took a nap.



As night fell, Panagos, dressed in dark clothes and carrying a rucksack, set off again through the Common back towards Parkside, strolling unhurriedly as if he didn't have a care in the world.

After arriving at his destination, Panagos jimmied the skylight in the loft conversion and made his way downstairs. On the landing, a cat's cradle was hooked over a radiator and, as he stroked the tabby in passing, it stretched and purred loudly. By torchlight, Panagos made his way into the hallway and towards the front door, where the alarm box was situated. He got his toolkit from his pocket and . . . suddenly the hall light flicked on.

Stanford stood tall in the kitchen doorway, PC McGinty at his shoulder.

A key opened the front door and Jack stood in the porch, flanked by four more officers. Panagos froze in silent shock for a second, then, with a banshee wail, he dipped his head and charged at Jack. Panagos's broad shoulder hit Jack in the ribcage, lifted him off the ground and out into the front garden, knocking the four officers over like skittles. Panagos dumped Jack hard onto the lawn, flat on his back, knocking the wind out of him. The four officers scrambled onto Panagos, grabbing any moving limb and holding it to the ground. Panagos roared and fought as the officers held on for dear life, making no attempt to cuff him until he'd completely run out of steam.

Upstairs lights from neighbouring houses flicked on and faces appeared at windows. As Panagos finally slowed to a stop and sank back onto the grass panting for breath, Jack crawled out from underneath the scrum of sweaty bodies. McGinty stepped forwards and, using two sets of handcuffs to stretch across Panagos's broad back, he finally secured their man.

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Stanford walked calmly past the mayhem, towards Mr Liam Newark-Bentley, the owner of the property, who was now standing in the middle of the street. He and his family had not gone away for the weekend as planned; they'd got as far as the end of their street before being pulled over by Stanford, who'd explained the situation. Newark-Bentley had quickly agreed that the Met could use his house as bait, as long as not one single carpet fibre was left out of place. 'Thank you very much, sir,' Stanford now said politely. 'We're grateful to you for agreeing to allow us to use your home like this. The skylight will be fixed now. If you're happy to stay in the hotel we've provided, just for tonight, you'll be able to come back tomorrow.'

And then Newark-Bentley said those words that Stanford had waited five years to hear. 'We're very happy to help, DS Stanford. And thank you for keeping us safe. You have a very difficult job.'

On the periphery of the action, Mike got out of an area car and walked towards Jack, who was still seated on Newark-Bentley's front lawn trying to breathe. 'Well done, Jack. I love the way you distracted him so the uniforms could pounce.'

Jack held his ribs as he squeezed out the words, 'Fuck off, Mike,' then Mike's hand reached down and dragged Jack to his feet. By the time Jack was fully upright, Stanford had joined them.

'PC McGinty, read him his rights,' Stanford instructed. The look of excitement on McGinty's face gave Stanford a far better feeling of satisfaction than he would have got if he'd taken the honour for himself. Mike beamed his approval and shook Stanford's hand. Mike thanked them both for a great few days and for being allowed to briefly feel like a copper once again. 'If you ever need my old brain again, you have my number. It's been a pleasure, boys.' And, with that, Mike returned to the area car and was driven away.

Later that evening, the squad room was buzzing with the overlapping chatter of invigorated officers reliving their exciting evening and comparing scrapes and bruises. ‘Thank you, Jack.’ Stanford’s tone was sincere. Although he knew that Ridley had an inter-station duty to help when help was requested, he also knew that Jack’s input was above and beyond anything he’d expected. ‘DCI Ridley’s lucky to have you.’

Jack’s eyes twitched in pain as the adrenaline began to fade and his body started to complain about being slammed to the ground, then jumped on by four policemen. ‘Enjoy your victory, sir. It was hard earned.’

Jack turned and, to a chorus of ‘Night, sir,’ he headed home for a hot bath, a glass of wine and a cuddle with his beautiful, beached whale of a fiancée.



## CHAPTER 2

Jack got home around 9 p.m. As he turned into the end of his street, he was still imagining the fantasy evening ahead of him: Penny would be out, Maggie would be in her pyjamas, the wine would be open, and the dinner would be in the oven ready for him to serve. He was exhausted from the Obbo with Mike Haskin and Richard Stanford but also elated from their success and subsequent arrest of Panagos. Stanford would be dining out on that one for years to come.

This part of Twickenham was lovely compared to where their old flat had been in Teddington. They'd purchased the three-storey terraced house just under four months ago. It was a doer-upper. The kitchen, lounge and master bedroom had been the priority – these rooms were now painted plain white with cheap, mis-matched furniture that would ultimately be replaced when they'd had time to decide on the 'look' they wanted to go for. The second bedroom would slowly become a nursery but, for now, was nothing more than a pink-plastered box. The top floor had two bedrooms and one bathroom – this was his mother's domain. She'd moved in with them at the old flat within weeks of Charlie's death, as both Jack and Maggie were absolutely insistent that she was not going to live on her own. They initially assumed that, regardless of the love they had for her, Penny would be an added 'burden' – for want of a better word – but, in truth, she'd been the one to hold everything together.

Since moving to the Twickenham house, Penny had been a godsend. She stepped into Maggie's life at exactly the moments when Jack wanted to step out – the nestbuilding, the conversations about pelvic floors and piles and sickness, the fear and trepidation



about life after the baby was born. All of the things Jack would have been totally crap at, Penny was in her element. And when it came to the everyday stuff, Penny made Maggie's life easier and better than Jack ever could – and being constantly occupied helped Penny to rally from the death of her beloved husband far more quickly than if she'd been allowed to wallow in some supervised-living accommodation, full of other old people with dead partners. She had a new generation to live for now and she was going to love the new baby with all of her heart. Penny likened waiting for the birth of Maggie's baby to waiting for Jack to be handed over from Social Services all those years ago.

Jack was very lucky that Maggie and Penny got on so well, but Penny was also surprisingly astute about their need for privacy. She'd signed up for a couple of night classes and had even bought herself a little TV for her bedroom, turning the top floor into a proper little granny flat. She was secretive about the night classes, prompting hours of humorous speculation, Jack eventually deciding that Penny was doing pole dancing and woodwork.

Jack loved returning of an evening to his ever-changing home. This house, or one like it, had been their dream ever since they moved from Totnes. They'd been priced out of the London market for so long, but after Jack's 'windfall', they jumped on this property by quickly offering £15k below the asking price, in cash. Within a week, they were in. The windfall was attributed to an impulsive lottery ticket purchase, which Maggie never questioned. Jack didn't know whether she thought he was lying, or whether she was just too scared of hearing the truth. All Maggie knew for sure was that her husband was a changed man after the Rose Cottage case. He was *found*. He now knew where he belonged and that, for any person, was life-changing.

\* \* \*





Penny didn't know that Jack had even looked for his real dad, let alone that he'd found out he was the son of Harry Rawlins, one of London's biggest gangsters in the 1980s. That was Jack and Maggie's secret. But the 'gift' of £250,000 was Jack's secret alone. Jack knew it was the proceeds of crimes from back in the '80s; he knew it was untraceable; he knew the thieves were long gone; he knew the case file was closed. No one knew or would care . . . and all that made it easy to keep, and easy to spend.

The money had now dwindled, but Penny's pension and Jack's sergeant's wages kept them ticking over. As a new young family, they were firmly on the social ladder – they wouldn't fall off unless Jack got sacked, but on the other hand they wouldn't climb unless he got promoted. For the first time in years, it felt as though life was where it should be.

The baby would complete the family, and Jack and Maggie would get married once she'd got her figure back – her words, not his – he was loving her big breasts and ample backside . . .

But Jack's dream evening vanished in a split second when he saw the car parked in his space on the street. They had visitors.

Jack recognised the deep, howling laughter as soon as he opened his front door. Regina was a nursing auxiliary in the same hospital as Maggie and they'd bonded over both being pregnant. She was nice enough, but loud. The moment the front door closed, Maggie was out of the kitchen and in Jack's arms. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry . . .' Her words were punctuated with a kiss. 'She's had a rough day and I wanted to cheer her up.' Maggie dragged Jack down, over her heavily pregnant belly and hugged him tightly round his neck. He could have fallen asleep on her shoulder right there, but instead he allowed himself to be led into the kitchen where he would spend the next couple of hours pretending to want Maggie's friends in his home.

Regina and Mario were both drinking non-alcoholic wine, and there was a buffet-style feast on the table. Jack briefly raised his

dark eyebrows; widening his beautiful brown eyes at Maggie with the unspoken message: 'We're not a food bank.' Maggie had previously told Jack that Regina and Mario were struggling financially in the run-up to the birth of their baby, so he knew why Maggie had taken it upon herself to treat them to a feast every now and then. They'd also be forced to take home doggy bags, whether they were embarrassed to or not.

Regina had been to the house numerous times, but tonight was Mario's first visit. Jack knew it was his job to talk 'man stuff' with this stranger and as Jack got himself a beer from the fridge, Mario made a comment about abstaining from alcohol in solidarity with Regina. Jack quickly assumed that his evening would go downhill from there.

In fact, Mario was decent company and, by 10 p.m., he was on the beer too. Mario was a painter and decorator, existing on word-of-mouth recommendations. It was a tough job, with long hours and no security, but he had the sort of friendly demeanour that won people over quickly. Slowly but surely, Jack began to understand why Maggie gave so much to this couple and was happy to get nothing practical in return. They were worth helping.

At 11.15 p.m., Regina and Mario said their goodbyes at the front door, and Jack confirmed that he'd be in touch to talk about dates and times for decorating the nursery. The men shook hands, the women hugged, and Jack finally had his wife all to himself.

Maggie brought Jack a whisky and they settled into their newly adopted positions on the sofa. Before Maggie was too pregnant, they'd sit close together, using only one half of the sofa, but these days, they sat at opposite ends so that Maggie could bring her feet up and rest them on Jack's lap. 'Was it your idea for Mario to paint the nursery?' she asked. Jack's smug little smirk told her that it was. 'I love you, Jack Warr.'

‘I know.’ From where he sat, he could hardly see her face above her bump. He stroked his hand across her belly. ‘Ah! She’s a footballer!’ Jack closed his eyes and felt his baby slowly turn and stretch and kick. ‘There is only one in there, isn’t there, Mags?’ For a moment, there was genuine worry on Jack’s face. ‘Regina’s much smaller than you and I can definitely feel three legs.’

‘She’s only five months, you idiot; I’m close to my due date. And I imagine that third leg might be an arm.’ By midnight, Maggie was hauling herself up the stairs by the bannister, and Jack was pushing her bum skywards from below. They were both giggling as quietly as possible, so as not to wake Penny. ‘That doesn’t actually help, Jack.’

He knew. She told him every night. But he liked doing it.

At the top of the stairs were three boxes from Amazon. Maggie went into the bathroom, leaving Jack to have a nosy at what she and Penny had been spending his wages on. With no distinguishing pictures on the delivery boxes, Jack scabbled about on his hands and knees trying to decipher the labels. Nursery stuff was about all he could discern.

As he knelt on the third stair down, his elbows on the landing floor; he smiled. Penny and Maggie’s nestbuilding had accelerated over the past few weeks. They’d shown him material swatches, paint charts, online nurseries and asked his opinion, which they didn’t really want or need, and Jack didn’t want to give. Being asked his opinion put Jack in very dangerous territory: if he said it was up to them, he’d be scolded for being uninterested; but if he offered an opinion that differed from theirs, he’d be scolded for not understanding the needs of his unborn child. Jack much preferred the mind games of criminals to the mind games of his wife and mother: they mercilessly ganged up on him all the time. But the masochistic part of him adored being bullied by the women he



loved – and it was tragic that Charlie wasn't here to share the burden. He deserved to be here. He'd worked hard all his life to mould Jack into a man to be proud of and now, when Jack needed his dad to be on his side against 'the women', Charlie wasn't around. The very thought of Charlie brought tears to Jack's eyes – the pain stage of his grief was merging with the anger stage and resulted in short-lived, intense moments of heightened emotion. Jack deep-breathed through it and the tears subsided.

Then a strange memory popped into Jack's head and he sat on the stair to relive it.

\* \* \*

*The sonogram burst into life and showed them an indistinct, grainy picture like something on a water-damaged VHS tape. In this uniquely beautiful moment, Jack's mind leapt to one of his first cases for the Met, in which he was asked to watch illegally produced porn tapes found in a toilet cistern, to see if any of them starred James Daniels, a well-known, yet highly elusive local pervert. Jack closed his eyes – 'For fuck's sake!' he thought as he desperately tried to get rid of the memory. Maggie squeezed his hand, and he was back in the room.*

*She repeated the question they'd been asked and which he hadn't heard: 'Do we want to know the sex?' The romantic in Jack didn't want to know, but the practical decorator in Maggie definitely did. So, for the sake of painting the nursery in the appropriate colour, they both said yes.*

*'It's a girl!'*

*The tears welled up in Jack's eyes. He had no idea why and he could do nothing to stop them. He and Maggie looked at each other through the blur of tears, and they laughed with joy, hysteria, fear, anxiety, anticipation. 'She's amazing' Maggie blubbed, as she looked*





*at the grey snow on the screen with a black bubble at the top, inside which was their kidney-bean baby. But all Jack could see was James Daniels' bare arse bobbing up and down . . .*

*When they got home, Penny had made spaghetti bolognese and opened a bottle of non-alcoholic wine. With only two places set at the table, they knew that this meal was for them and that she'd retire to her granny flat to watch reruns of Lovejoy. In the centre of the table was a large white box tied with a bow. 'You don't have to use it,' Penny said before heading upstairs and leaving them to serve themselves.*

*Inside the box was the most stunning christening gown either of them had ever seen. On the hem, in faint, worn lace, were the letters P and C. 'Oh my God.' Jack's words fell from his lips in a long, exhaled breath. 'This is her wedding dress. Her mum made it – look, she sewed P and C just above the hem. Penny and Charlie. No one knew the letters were even there apart from the three of them. It was for this moment, Mags, it was so that when Penny made her wedding dress into her own baby's christening gown, the initials would sit on the hem of that too. And I didn't even know Mum could sew!'*

*'She couldn't.' Maggie smiled. 'I guess she wasn't learning how to pole dance at her night class, after all.'*

\* \* \*

The toilet flushed, Maggie came out of the bathroom and waddled past Jack towards the bedroom. In bed, Jack snuggled in behind her and kissed her neck. She stirred in his arms, her hand reached back and settled on his naked thigh. Within minutes, they were both asleep.

\* \* \*

