

CHAPTER 1

Present day

Rose Cottage had lain empty for eight months. It was a neat, two-storey white stone building with thick, black wooden lintels above the central front door and each of the five small windows – three up, two down. On the more sheltered west side of the front wall, the ivy had completely taken over and was lifting the slates from the roof, but on the exposed east side, the stonework was bare and had been flattened by centuries of strong winter winds swirling down from the hills. From some angles the cottage looked as though it was leaning to the left.

As the cottage was rural, with stables and a hay barn, the land surrounding it had been fairly unkempt even before it was left empty, but a small area directly outside the front door had been landscaped into narrow, winding footpaths circling rose beds. The wild roses, left to their own devices, were still fighting against the changing seasons, but today they looked particularly beautiful. In fact, they were the only real reminder of how lovely the cottage had once been.

Inside, the furniture had been moved into the centre of the room, just in front of the hearth. A heavy wooden chest of drawers and two bookshelves surrounded a two-seater horsehair sofa, which had four occasional tables piled high on top of it. Some of the books from the bookshelves had been forced into the gaps of this makeshift bonfire, and the rest had been thrown into the hearth on top of a huge stack of paper.

Suddenly, the small downstairs windows to the left and right of the front door exploded under the immense pressure from the



heat inside, sending glass and wood showering into the rose beds. Flames quickly took hold of the wooden lintels and, within seconds, smoke had blackened the white stone wall.

The small lounge was soon consumed by flames, which rose to the ceiling beams, and travelled to the wooden staircase and up the stairs. They eventually pushed their way out between the slates from the wooden ceiling beams beneath, and it wasn't long before a spark leapt across to the hay barn, still full of bales of hay for horses long gone. The barn went up like a Roman candle and, from that point onwards, there was no stopping the fire.

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A quarter of a mile away, in a small housing estate, the first of the 999 calls was made. Neighbours watched as dark brown smoke billowed into the clear blue sky. When the house had been occupied, the smoke from the chimney had always been the expected wispy light grey, but this was different. It looked heavy and rancid, and just kept coming.

Speculation was rife as to how the fire had started. Was it a tramp trying to keep warm? Was it kids taking their games too far?

Fourteen 999 calls were made in total, sending two fire engines racing towards Rose Cottage from Aylesbury Fire Station. By the time they arrived, the interior of the cottage had almost gone and the hay barn was a pile of rubble and ashes. However, the stables, which were furthest away from the cottage, were still fully ablaze.

When the fire brigade arrived, they split into two teams – one to tackle the fire inside, and a second to the stables to prevent the flames from jumping to the woodland beyond. It was easier to gain control of the stables because, once the wooden frames had gone, there was nothing left to fuel the fire. The interior of the cottage,





however, kept re-igniting as the fire found new fuel on the upper floor and from the wooden roof beams. It didn't take much to give the flames a new lease of life.

By nightfall, the grounds resembled a muddy swamp and the rose beds had been completely destroyed by hours of heavy fire boots. What was left of the furniture had been thrown into the front garden, to avoid further re-ignition inside the property, so the once beautiful rose garden looked like a fly-tipping site.

'Stop!' the sub-officer shouted as he emerged through the hole that used to be the front door. 'Nobody goes back inside!'

He reached for his phone and dialled Sally Bown. It was late and the phone rang for quite some time before it was finally answered.

'Sal, this one's for you. We've got a body.'

* * *

Fire Investigation Officer Sally Bown arrived at the scene at eleven o'clock. From the neck down, she was kitted out in her well-worn fire officer's uniform, but from the neck up, she was immaculate. Her long brown hair was in a loose, low braided bun, held in place by an antique hairpin of white beads and silver leaves, and her light make-up enhanced her natural beauty. The whole crew fancied her on an average day, so her arrival was definitely making their arduous night better. She didn't mind. They respected her position, so them watching her arse every now and then didn't bother her in the slightest.

'It's way better than men *not* watching my arse,' was her response to any woman who objected to the glib sexism that came from the male firefighters. And Sally looked at them, too, so she thought it only fair.

At Sally's side was a child of a SOCO with puffy eyes and bed hair. He carried a case almost as big as himself, and he stuck to





her like glue. He wasn't quite used to shift work yet, but if he'd been called by Sally Bown, then he was good at his job. He'd learn the rest.

In the lounge of Rose Cottage, the pile of heavy wooden furniture was now destroyed. The brass hinges and handles from the chest of drawers lay on the floor just in front of the hearth and, on the obliterated sofa, part-melted into the springs, lay a dead body, charred and blackened beyond recognition.

'Jesus,' muttered Sally as she got out her camera and filmed the scene, starting at the front door and moving methodically towards the centre of the lounge and the dead body. Her young SOCO waited outside until instructed to do otherwise.

'Sally, stop!' Sub shouted. She stopped dead. Sub was a man of very few words and everyone who worked with him knew that he only spoke when he had something important to say. 'Retrace your steps, Sal. Now. Please.'

Sally started walking backwards, toe to heel, following exactly the same path as she'd taken to come in.

There was a deafening crack from directly above Sally's head. A hand grabbed her belt and she flew backwards with the force of a recoiling bungee rope, to be caught by Sub's waiting arms. Once he had a firm hold on her, he fell backwards onto the floor, taking Sally with him. In the next split second an iron bed frame dropped through the air and landed right where she had been standing. A cloud of ash and debris flew upwards and took an age to come back down. When visibility returned, Sub was still on the floor, Sally held between his legs, his arms gripping her tightly round the waist. The two legs of the bed that were closest to them had smashed deep holes through the lounge floorboards, and the other two were straddling the remains of the sofa and the charred body, which was still, miraculously, in one piece.





Sub momentarily tightened his grip around Sally's waist, before letting go. That tiny squeeze reassured her that she was safe. As she gripped Sub's raised knees to lever herself to her feet, and he eased her forwards with his hands politely in the small of her back, she couldn't help thinking what a massive shame it was that he looked so like her dad.

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When he arrived on the scene, Detective Inspector Martin Prescott was frustrated to be held back from entering Rose Cottage until the risk assessment had been done. He couldn't imagine three more infuriating words in the English language than 'risk fucking assessment'.

Prescott had been senior officer to Sally Bown's older sister for more than twenty years, and the families were close. This was not unusual for rural Aylesbury, or for the local emergency services. Sally knew he'd be impatient so, while the fragile ceiling and crumbling walls were made safe, she kept him occupied by showing him the video footage of the interior.

'At first we thought he could be a vagrant,' Sally told Prescott.

'He?'

Prescott smiled as he corrected Sally's assumption. It was clear from the video that there was no way of knowing the gender of the charred remains at this point. Prescott made Sally smile without even trying. She thought his thick Yorkshire accent made him sound happy, even when they were disagreeing with each other.

'Sorry,' Sally corrected herself. 'We initially thought that the body could be that of a vagrant unlucky enough to have set fire to themselves after lighting candles to keep warm. There's no electricity in the cottage, and we found several tea lights scattered around



the lounge – on the mantelpiece and in the hearth – but when I looked more closely at the debris on the floor directly next to the sofa, it looked like the furniture had been piled up around him. I mean, around the body.’

‘So, the body was there first?’

‘That’s for you to decide, Martin.’

‘Accelerant?’

‘Undetermined as yet.’

Prescott was disappointed when the video footage ended.

‘That all you got?’

Sally started to play a second video, which began by showing the iron bed frame sitting squarely astride the sofa. Prescott closed his eyes and sighed heavily at the sight of his crime scene buried under a double bed. The quiet breath he exhaled formed the words ‘Fuck me!’

Prescott took a moment to gather his thoughts. When he was thinking, his eyes flicked from side to side as though he were seeing the various scenarios flashing past inside his head. He appeared to be a very laid-back man, but there was an intensity bubbling away underneath the surface. Mildly dyslexic, soon after joining the force he had made the decision never to write anything down in public. Instead, he’d decided he would remember everything, and in a brain that full, it could sometimes take a little longer to process what he was seeing. Although he hid his intellect under Northern glibness, Prescott was a clever man, and it was always worth waiting for him.

‘Right, well, you know the rules, Sal. It’s a suspicious death, so I have to assume murder till the evidence tells me otherwise.’ He walked away from Sally before she could reply and headed for the cottage to see if he could at least peek in through where the window had once been. ‘And if it’s murder, then I’m wasting valuable time standing out here doing naff all!’



Sally raced ahead and stood in his way, forcing him to stop.

‘This may be your crime scene, DI Prescott, but you are *not* going in until I say it’s safe for you to do so.’

Prescott looked down at Sally. She was at least four inches shorter than him, but she was a feisty woman and she wasn’t going to back down.

‘And anyway,’ Sally added, ‘I hadn’t finished.’

She fast-forwarded the second video, stopping it at seven minutes and thirty-two seconds. On the wall above the hearth the word PERVERT could be seen scrawled in red paint. It was mostly covered in a thick layer of black soot, but the letters could still just be made out.

‘It looks like you could have a dead sex offender. And I doubt he got here on his own.’

Prescott got his vape out of his left-hand jacket pocket.

‘I know that should make me feel better about having to wait to gain access to me crime scene, but it just annoys me more. I don’t know if that word relates to this dead body or not, do I? So now I’m more frustrated than before you showed me.’ He dragged on the vape, but couldn’t for the life of him get it to work. He put it back into his pocket and, from the other jacket pocket, got out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. ‘You follow your rules and get that place scaffolded up asap and I’ll be over there shortening me life.’

* * *

It took six hours before Martin Prescott could don a blue paper suit and shoes. His white paper face mask sat round his neck as he watched Sally pointing at the partially collapsed roof and muttering to Sub. When Sub nodded, Prescott immediately pulled up the mask. The man of few words had spoken.



Inside Rose Cottage, scaffolding held up the charred ceiling beams and the loose stones from the walls had been removed, leaving behind a relatively solid and safe structure. Visually, the scene was as Prescott expected, based on the preview he'd got from Sally's videos, but nothing ever prepared him for the smell of a body. The stench of burnt flesh and bones overpowers every other sense and, even through his face mask, he could smell and taste the distinctive miasma of 'long pig'.

"'Long pig' is what cannibals call human beings,' Sally had explained on their first ever meeting at a crime scene, more than fourteen years ago. 'By all accounts we taste like barbecued pork and, as we cook, we definitely smell like it.'

'Fuck me,' Prescott had mumbled through his face mask. 'No wonder you're single.'

Now, Prescott and Sally paused just inside the jagged hole in the wall that used to be the front doorway of Rose Cottage and watched the dog handler lead her spaniel through the rubble. The dog wore tiny red canvas boots, Velcroed in place around the ankles and with thick rubber soles that protected her paws from smouldering embers and sharp debris, allowing her to work safely and comfortably. The single repeated command of 'Show me, Amber' was all that could be heard inside Rose Cottage.

Amber's handler kept her off the sofa, as the charred body was still there. The dog worked hard, sniffing and moving around the remnants of furniture. Her tail wagged, her tongue lolled, she jumped and rummaged, but she didn't make one single indication that an accelerant was present.

'Maybe the fire burnt intensely enough to destroy any accelerant?' Sally speculated. 'Or maybe a less common one was used. The dog only knows the most common ones, such as petrol or household flammables. Your forensics people might still find accelerant on the items you collect.'

‘I’ll make sure I’ve got a tennis ball in me pocket if they do.’

Sally giggled at the unstoppable image that popped into her head, of an entire forensics team being trained to seek out evidence with the promise of a ball as a reward.

‘I think the ball only works with Amber.’

Prescott signalled for his blue-suited SOCOs to descend on the scene. He pointed at the sofa.

‘There’s a body in there, fellas, but it’s goin’ nowhere, so don’t rush and don’t compromise evidence just to get it out.’

A sea of nodding blue paper heads dispersed around the room and set about collecting anything and everything that might be useful – wood, brass hinges, plaster, bed springs. All items were individually double-wrapped into nylon bags to preserve any traces of accelerant.

Now that Prescott was inside his crime scene, he had the patience of a saint. He could see the wheels of the machinery turning, see his officers working and progress being made. He followed his SOCOs deeper into the mess, allowing them to clear and preserve the way in front of him, and Sally followed after. This was *his* scene now, and she totally respected the shift in authority.

Eventually, and in relative silence, Prescott and Sally made it as far as the sofa. The iron bed frame, which had now been removed, had missed the body when it fell. Even so, the body was massively damaged. The face was not only burnt down to the skeleton, but the cheekbones and lower jawbone were smashed and many of the teeth were missing.

‘Could that damage to the skull be from falling debris?’ Prescott asked.

Sally leant in to get a better look. ‘The ceiling was largely gone by the time we arrived, so God knows what might have fallen through and landed on the sofa. The cleaner-looking skull fractures around the temple area could be heat stress. The skull can sometimes just pop, depending on the intensity of heat.’

‘Damn shame this fella’s teeth are so damaged,’ Prescott commented, almost to himself. Then louder, ‘Look at the bloody mess your lot have made of this place!’

Sally was just about to tear a strip off him when she looked at his partially hidden face. His eyes were crinkled at the edges and she knew he was smiling.

‘Bloody fires,’ Prescott continued, avoiding her gaze. ‘If the flames don’t destroy the evidence, the water does.’ He scratched his head through his blue paper hood and his eyes flicked about again as he thought through everything he was seeing. ‘If this is murder, we might be looking for someone who’s savvy about forensics, you know. I mean, you can’t print burnt wood and you can’t find shoe prints under water.’

He was suddenly distracted by the contents of the hearth. The water from the fire-hose on the floor in this area of the room looked like thin black paint – a result you might expect to get after paper is burnt, creating a fine, soluble ash. Further back in the hearth, untouched by the water altogether, were the remnants of what looked like stacks of dry, charred paper. The paper was now nothing more than tiny fragments of its original form, but the volume was confusing.

Prescott picked up the longest of four fire pokers, and gently nudged the top layer of paper away in the hope of getting to some less burnt samples underneath. He tried not to damage any of the delicate paper. Eventually he spotted a single intact piece, no more than one centimetre in length, showing the instantly recognisable pale blue-green pattern from the bottom left-hand corner of an old five-pound note. Prescott carefully picked up this fragile piece of evidence and placed it in the palm of Sally’s gloved hand.

‘It’s cash, Sal. These stacks of paper . . . it’s all cash.’

* * *

Jack Warr was a strikingly attractive man. Thick, dark hooded brows hid the deepest brown eyes. He had a cleft chin which showed the permanent shadow of impending stubble and, when he smiled, two long dimples appeared on either side of his mouth, running from his chin to his cheekbones. He had a naturally athletic physique that looked great in anything.

Maggie, his partner, always said it was a good job that his body was so amazing as he made no real effort with the clothes he dressed it in, but she fancied the pants off him no matter what he wore. It was those eyes that had got her in the first instance, though. Eyebrows down, Jack's eyes would express such incredible intensity that if he told you he could take on David Haye and win, you'd believe him. Eyebrows up, he looked like a delicate, innocent soul that any woman would love to care for. This balance between man and boy was why Maggie loved Jack so much. He was her protector and her lover, her rock and her friend.

'Where's the jacket that goes with this shirt you've put out?' Jack shouted from the master bedroom. He liked to call it the 'master' bedroom, regardless of the fact that it was exactly the same size as the spare bedroom. The view over Teddington was what made it masterful, according to Jack.

Maggie didn't answer, so Jack was forced to go into the kitchen to find her. On the breakfast bar were a bowl of cereal and a cup of tea that she'd put out for him. On the back of his chair was his jacket and underneath were his shoes. Maggie's crooked smile said, *Why do we do this every morning?*

Jack kissed and hugged her tightly. He never tired of just holding Maggie in his arms. She felt the same today as she had when they first met. Jack would maintain that Maggie kept her exceptional figure effortlessly, but she tried her very best to go to the hospital gym during every lunch break and, when Jack had the car for work, she'd leave herself enough time to walk to the hospital. For Maggie, this

daily exercise was not only good for her body, but also hugely therapeutic, as it took her away from the stresses, pressures and horrors of being a foundation year doctor. Neither Jack's nor Maggie's job was easy. Shift patterns and heavy workloads dictated that junk food was sometimes on the menu and, when they did get a rare day off together, they loved nothing more than going out for drinks, dinner, and a movie.

Maggie exercised to stay beautiful for Jack, and Jack did absolutely nothing to stay fit for Maggie. She was a health-conscious 34-year-old and he was a slobbish 36-year-old. Maggie, in stark contrast to Jack's 'Heathcliff' look, had blonde hair and blue eyes. Jack adored the way she looked when she rolled out of bed in the morning, with her hair ruffled and her pale, flawless skin unhidden by make-up. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and would ever see. He had eyes for no one but her.

Maggie had just come off a night shift on the orthopaedic ward at the New Victoria Hospital. She was three weeks into her new rotation and, despite always coming home exhausted, she still got Jack ready for work before she went to bed. By the time he got home that night, she'd be gone again, so this hug had to last him at least twenty-four hours. Jack nuzzled Maggie's neck. He normally hated the way she smelt when she came home from work – the horrible combination of alcohol hand sanitiser, that chemical smell that hangs in the air in hospitals, mothballs and, occasionally, vomit – but this morning he was running late, so she'd already had time to shower and, therefore, smelt of tangerines.

Fourteen months previously, Maggie and Jack had agreed that moving from Devon to London was the right thing to do for her career. His career, in his words, wasn't as big a deal as hers. Maggie knew she wanted to be an orthopaedic surgeon, whereas all Jack really knew for sure was that he wanted to be able to go and watch

Plymouth Argyle whenever they played at home. He wasn't lazy, but he was restless. Or, as he put it, at a crossroads.

At 36, Jack should, by now, have been a detective inspector at least, rather than a lowly DC. When Maggie had asked him if they could move to London for her career, he'd said, 'Sure. Gang wrangling will be a bit like sheep wrangling, I expect. Only with knives.'

Maggie had asked Jack what it was he truly wanted, and all he could come up with was 'you', which, although lovely, wasn't very helpful. Then he'd answered more seriously.

'I want that look I see in your eyes when you put that stethoscope round your neck. You're proud of what you do, Mags. You're excited. I want to feel excited.'

London was, in fact, a huge risk, both emotionally and financially, but Jack's commitment to Maggie made it the right decision. They knew no one in the South-East and, although Maggie could make a lifelong friend in a supermarket line, Jack was more standoffish. He didn't care about friends – he had Maggie – but the money was a worry. They went from having both time and cash to spend at the end of the month, to being skint ships that passed in the night. And they had to plan two months in advance for any extra expenditure – such as the car's MOT. Maggie dealt with all of this, though. She was the organiser, and she was the one who never panicked when the account turned from black to red.

Jack had agreed to make the life-changing move because he'd always known that Maggie was destined for greater things, and he didn't want his indecisiveness to hold her back. As it happened, Jack's current boss, DCI Simon Ridley, had heard about his transfer on the grapevine and had done a little digging. Jack's reputation in Devon was as a solid foot soldier with an exceptional eye for detail and a natural ability to talk to people, read them and work out the best way to get what he needed from them. His interview technique

was greatly admired, although it had never been pushed to its limits in Totnes. Ridley had decided to give Jack the opportunity to find his path with the Serious Crime Squad, but very quickly worked out that Jack's not being stretched in his previous role was less to do with the location and more to do with his lack of ambition. However, he was diligent and got on with his work, so Ridley had kept him on . . . for now.

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It was Jack's turn to have the car that morning which, as he sat in a tailback on the A3 near Battersea, he was deeply regretting. His work mobile danced on the passenger seat, pinging and vibrating away as message after message came through from the app version of HOLMES. HOLMES was the bible for police case-related information and was normally installed and issued on tablets for use in court or on cases. But the technology was unreliable, so many officers invested in top-of-the-range mobile phones and installed HOLMES on them instead. It was allowed – just about.

As the pinging and vibrating continued, Jack smiled and shook his head as he imagined DCI Ridley's messages, all perfectly spelt and punctuated instructions for the day. Ridley was in meetings all morning, which was why being a little bit late was no big deal. Jack would make the time up at the end of the day, seeing as Maggie would be on her next night shift and he'd be going home to a cold bed.

Ridley led a divisional team of twelve Serious Crime officers. The case that Jack was currently working on had started out with one young dad, who happened to be an engineer, realising that the baby monitor in his daughter's nursery was sending a signal to three devices, rather than the two he expected. The monitor had been hacked and an unknown person or persons were watching his daughter sleep.

Once the police had the geography of the rogue signals pinned down, the legwork had begun. Hundreds of hours tracing, interviewing, ruling in or ruling out every known paedophile and associate in the area. Over several months, they had discovered hundreds of hacked baby monitors, all within the same fifty-mile radius. They visited 756 paedophiles, their friends and their families, and narrowed the field to thirty-two. Then to one, a Donal Sweeney, who shared a cell with a man whose never-convicted paedophile nephew sold baby monitors to high street stores.

It was 8.45 by the time Jack walked down the battleship-grey corridor towards CID's shared office. There was nothing remotely dynamic about this part of the station. He paused in the canteen doorway, inhaled the coffee-bean air and diverted inside.

Jack slowly worked his way through all of his text messages and emails over an espresso and a croissant dipped in honey. He only drank coffee at work, because Maggie hated the smell and taste of it when he kissed her, and seeing as kissing Maggie was more important than caffeine, he did without coffee when he was at home. But Jack needed caffeine to get him through this bloody case.

The canteen was bustling with uniformed officers. Some ate heavy meals, some light breakfasts, depending on where they were in their shifts. As Jack made himself a to-do list from Ridley's text messages, he snorted through his croissant, sending a fine spray of loose puff pastry across the table. Ridley had written:

Laura's post-8 p.m. report overwrites yours, rather than adds to yours from yesterday morning. Please amend in the system.
Print in triplicate and leave on my desk.

Ridley was the only man in the world who texted in full sentences. Jack sat back in his chair and, wiping the stubborn, buttery crumbs from round his mouth with the back of his hand, looked around

the canteen. He could hear snippets of conversations as officers talked about the cases they were on, the arrests they'd just made, the raids they were about to make. The amount of adrenaline and testosterone flying around Jack was dizzying – but none of it was his. He knew that his team would be at their desks, focused and driven to find the dirty bastard who was watching other people's kids sleep. So why was he late and sitting by himself in the canteen? The truth was that, no matter how friendly and welcoming Ridley's team was, Jack still kept them at arm's length.

Jack had gone from being a normal-sized fish in a normal-sized pond, to being a very small fish in the hugest pond in the UK – the Metropolitan Police Service. And he felt out of his depth. After fourteen months of working at the Met, he still hadn't found his calling, his passion, his heart in London and, as the months ticked by, he honestly feared that he never would.

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When Jack finally walked into the squad room, he froze in the doorway. *Shit!* Ridley was *not* in meetings all morning and Jack being a little bit late was a *very* big deal.

Ridley didn't acknowledge Jack's presence, and no one in the team dared look away from him while he was talking. This was an impromptu briefing, in response to a phone call from DI Martin Prescott over in Aylesbury.

'We've just been handed a house fire, in which the charred remains of an unknown person have been discovered, together with approximately two million pounds in old money – also burnt. This is being treated as murder, arson and robbery. It's come to us because it's looking like it could be connected to one of our old cases from '95 – the biggest train robbery this country has ever seen. As I'm sure you

remember, no one was ever arrested and thirty million plus vanished without a trace. We're heading to Aylesbury this afternoon, after we've been to Donal Sweeney's.'

Then, and only then, did Ridley look at Jack. His dark eyes were a frightening combination of anger and disappointment.

'You're with me,' he said, then headed into his office and slammed the door shut.

The team shuffled uncomfortably in their seats, wondering what the hell Jack thought he was playing at by being so late. As Jack bowed his head in disgrace and wondered how this day could possibly get any worse, he spotted a blob of honey sliding down the front of his trouser leg.