PART ONE

“They hit your wall. Guarantee that’s not what they were aiming at.”

- Jim Grant

ONE

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The doorframe splintered with the first kick. It splintered some more with the second. The uniformed cop held his flashlight steady so Grant could see where he was aiming. The third kick hit just above the handle and the doorframe exploded in a shower of wood and lock springs. The uniformed cop went in left, gun drawn. His partner went in to the right. Jim Grant brought up the rear. Armed with a big left foot and a pair of Boston PD handcuffs.

Domino theory would suggest this is where it all started.

If Grant thought about that he’d have to disagree. It began when he agreed to cover Sam Kincaid’s night shift at District E13. Jamaica Plain. Dark clothes and a leather jacket. One small favour followed by offering to help uniform patrol look for the missing child. All the rest, Winthrop, Beacon Hill, the flare in Boston Harbor, all stemmed from that one small favour. The first physical manifestation of that was the house on Bischoff Street. So maybe the first domino did fall when he kicked the door in at quarter to midnight. The ruins of midnight awaited. Grant raised his foot and kicked.

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The house wasn’t in darkness. Every light was on. As soon as they were inside, Officer Nedeller turned his flashlight off and sheathed it in the ring on his belt. Officer Bridges didn’t have his flashlight out. Both seemed too young for such responsibilities but displayed maturity beyond their years. Grant flashed back to a Yorkshire saying that noticing how young policemen were becoming was a sign of old age.

Nedeller and Bridges cleared each room one at a time. Grant kept two paces behind them, letting the dynamic duo do their thing. Armed incursion. To protect life and property. In this case, the life of a four-year-old child.

The entrance hall was empty.

Clear.

Next, they checked the front room. A three-piece suite, a hi-fi cabinet, and a television. Alcoves lined with bookshelves but no books. No place to hide.

Clear.

Across the hall to a second reception room/study. A desk and a chair and more bookshelves. Still no books. Still nowhere to hide.

Clear.

Through the door at the end of the hall. The first area of danger. A completely new section of the house, the rear aspect. A kitchen and dining room knocked into one. Kitchens were always bad. There was potential for boiling water, fire, and sharp objects. Not to mention nooks and crannies just begging to hide an injured child. Or worse, a dead one.

There wasn’t anything cooking. Good. That meant no hot pans. Just a bowl of washing up water in the sink. The back door was locked. Also good. There’d been no quick getaway when the he had kicked the front door in. The floor was polished wood with a throw rug, and a dining table. The room was empty.

Clear.

Now for the upstairs. An open-plan staircase with no storage cupboard underneath. No hiding place for Grant to watch as he covered their backs. The stairs creaked. Three police officers going up two steps at a time. Not keeping to the edges to reduce the noise. They’d already made enough noise coming through the door. Nedeller had announced who they were in the first two seconds. If they had to shoot anybody, the neighbours would be able to confirm that loud and forceful declaration.

The lights were worrying. Under normal circumstances, a householder might have a couple of lights on. The room he was in and maybe the one he’d just come out of. Nobody left all the lights on. Nobody with all his oars in the water. Ken Dackermann didn’t have all his oars in the water. He was stressed and angry and going through a messy divorce. He was angry at his wife for taking their son. Angry men can do unforgivable things.

So the lights were worrying.

And the smell.

Grant hoped he was mistaken about what the smell meant.

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“Bedroom clear.”

That was Nedeller. In a straight no-nonsense voice. The front bedroom. Master bedroom it would be advertised as when the house went up for sale. Double bed, dressing table, walk-in closet. Plenty of places to hide but all of them empty. A few clothes. One pair of shoes.

No kidnapped four-year-old.

Grant let Nedeller lead the way. Bridges kept station just behind point, gun at the ready in both hands. Grant sniffed the air. The bad smell was one thing, but it was the lack of other smells that troubled him. No scented perfume. No hairspray. No body lotions. No sign that a woman had ever lived here. It would take a lot of cleaning to completely remove the woman from your life. Seemed like Dackermann had done a lot of cleaning. There was no evidence of a woman’s touch apart from the drapes and an empty flower vase.

Nedeller glanced at Bridges. Both were beginning to doubt they’d made the right decision forcing their way in here. Miles from their E13 patrol area. Across two district boundaries into D4, just east of the Back Bay Fens. Unauthorized and illegal search. All because the night detective said it was the right thing to do. All because of Jim Grant.

Grant sensed their resolve wavering. He spoke firmly. “Back bedroom.”

Nedeller nodded and crossed the landing at the top of the stairs. The bathroom only took seconds to clear. There was no space at all once the door was open. There was only one room left. The rear bedroom. Bridges turned the handle. Nedeller shoved it open with his foot. Both went in. Left and right. Guns ready. Grant stood on the landing and waited.

There were scuffling noises inside.

A cupboard door banged open.

Nothing else. The quiet became a prolonged silence. Grant took a calming breath and immediately wished he hadn’t. The smell was bad. He’d encountered it many times but you never got used to the stench. He waited. The voice was strained when it finally came.

“Clear.”

The last room in the house was empty. The uniformed cops let the tension seep out of them. Their shoulders sagged. Answering to the watch commander would put a black mark on their records. Nedeller tried to keep the resignation off his face when he looked at Grant.

Grant raised his eyes to the ceiling, then back at the young cop. He jerked a thumb skywards and pointed at the loft hatch. Where the bad smell was coming from.

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The hatch springs creaked as Grant tugged the handle. The hinges allowed the heavy wooden flap to drop down and release the folding ladder until it stood firmly on the landing carpet. Nedeller stood to one side, aiming up into the void. Bridges did the same on the other side. Procedure dictated that the armed cops go up the ladder first. Grant had had enough of bringing up the rear. He went up the ladder with the others covering the angles.

The attic was the only room with no lights on. Darkness enveloped Grant as soon as he stepped off the top rung. The smell hit him like a dull, wet slap. Rotting meat. Sewage. Voided body fluids. What dead people did when they had no muscles to stop them shitting themselves. The room was big and solid, and boarded from end to end and right to the eaves. Storage boxes emerged from the gloom as Grant’s eyes adjusted to the dark. Nobody shot him. Nobody came lunging out of the shadows. He found the light cord dangling from the ceiling and pulled.

Fluorescent tubes blinked to life.

The shadows drew back.

Grant stepped into the attic and heard Nedeller and Bridges come charging up the ladder behind him. First rule when taking a missing person report was always search the house before widening the net. In case they’d never made it out of the building. Most popular place for finding the body was the attic. There was a reason movies always used that cliché in old, dark houses. The lone woman climbing the stairs into the roof void. It was the scariest room in the house. There were lots of places to hide.

Even with the lights on, there were plenty of shadows clinging to the corners. Lots of boxes and suitcases and dust covers throwing unfamiliar shapes at Grant as he worked from one end to the other. Nedeller and Bridges did the same. Pulling back dust sheets. Searching packing cases. Covering each other’s backs. Turning up nothing.

The loft was empty.

Just like all the other rooms at number 23 Bischoff Street.

Grant found the source of the smell. An air vent that ran all the way up from the ground floor. Part of a ventilation system designed to avoid the fusty odour of little-used rooms. The blocked drains' smell must have come all the way up from the downstairs toilet.

Grant didn’t know what protocol the Boston Police Department had for situations like this, but back in Yorkshire there was only one thing to do. Put the kettle on.

“Anyone for a cup of tea?”

Nedeller and Bridges looked deflated.

Grant went down the ladder.

Moving closer to danger, not away from it.

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The atmosphere in the kitchen was oppressive. You could have cut the tension with a knife. Grant scanned the worktops for the kettle. Nedeller and Bridges sat at the dining table, their sidearms nestling on the folded napkins that adorned the place settings for three. It was the only mistake they made. They should have holstered them. Nedeller drummed his fingers on the table.

Knife, fork, and spoon times three.

Three cork tablemats.

Three empty dinner plates and three unused china cups.

Not for the three cops using the kitchen but for somebody else. The empty table wasn’t the only thing troubling Grant. The blocked drains didn’t smell as strong down here and there was a subtle change in the odour that Grant couldn’t put his finger on. Empty table. Empty house. Empty bookshelves. Whichever way you looked at it, the night detective had come up empty handed. He couldn’t find the kettle either. He checked the cupboards. It wasn’t there. He checked under the washbasin. It wasn’t there. He was about to give up on the cup of tea when a fresh thought struck him.

“What did she do?”

Nedeller stopped drumming his fingers. “Who?”

Grant faced the cupboards and spoke over his shoulder. “His wife. What was her job?”

Nedeller closed his eyes as he searched his memory. “Librarian.”

Grant nodded. “Lots of books then.”

“Doesn’t mean she’d have them at home.”

“She wouldn’t have empty bookshelves. That’d go against the grain.”

“Maybe she’s taken them.”

“You said she took the boy and fled for a place of safety.”

“That’s right.”

“No time for emptying the bookshelves.”

“I guess not.”

“And then he snatched the boy back.”

“Yes.”

Grant sniffed the air and tried to recognize the change. Something new had been added to the faint smell of rotting garbage. He set the thought aside. That was usually the best way to unblock his mind. Lateral thinking. Think about something else and the missing piece would pop into his head.

He turned towards the table.

“So, with his erratic behaviour and your concern for the boy’s safety, that’s your justification right there. To protect life, we forced entry and searched the house. Doesn’t matter we didn’t find anything. You had reasonable grounds to suspect the boy was in danger.”

Nedeller looked doubtful.

“You reckon?”

“All you’ve got to do is show just cause for your actions. We did the right thing. Captain can’t argue that.”

Satisfied, Grant opened the cupboard next to the stove.

“Eureka.”

He'd found the kettle.

Before he could pick it up, a big black object rolled out. The bowling ball was heavy and narrowly missed Grant’s foot. It bounced on the floor with a solid thump. The boards flexed like a trampoline. Only slightly, but enough to tell Grant what he’d been missing.

“Basement.”

He turned towards Nedeller half a second too late. The throw rug lifted like a monster from the deep as the cellar hatch flew open. The rotting garbage stench mixed with the smell of gasoline and Ken Dackermann sparked his Zippo.