

THROUGH A CRACK IN THE DOOR Pat Garwood

Chapter One

The child saw it all.

Through a crack in the door he saw his father holding the woman round her neck. He was red in the face and bending her back over the table and shouting at her.

The woman was making a strange noise and the child saw her reach behind her and grab a knife off the table. She twisted round and pushed it hard into his father's stomach. His father let out a loud roar and staggered back from her. The child ran upstairs and hid under the covers in his bedroom.

He knew that roar and waited, shaking, for footsteps coming heavily up the stairs and the smacking that would follow. He knew he was in trouble. He shouldn't have been out of bed. He shouldn't have watched. He was a bad boy.

There was silence.

Then more noises. A shout, a groan, a loud thump.

Silence.

Then he heard someone coming up the stairs. There was a slight creak as his door was pushed open. He kept really still and pretended to be asleep.

After a moment or two, the child heard the person go back downstairs and then the sound of the front door slamming shut.

He got up and peeped through the curtains. It was quite dark but he saw the woman get in a car and drive away.

He was on his own with Daddy.

He was too frightened to go downstairs. He quickly got back into bed.

He would stay there until Mummy came back.

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When the child woke in the morning, he found himself curled up in his bed with Mummy, who was still dressed.

'Morning Georgie,' she said giving him a kiss and smoothing his hair back from his face. She looked as if she had been crying.

He looked beyond her and round the room, anxiously.

‘Where’s Daddy?’ he asked.

She took his hand.

‘Listen Darling,’ she said, ‘something bad happened to Daddy last night, and it means he’s had to go away for a long time and that he won’t ever be coming back to us.’

‘Does that mean that he can’t hurt us any more?’ asked George solemnly.

Her eyes filled with tears.

‘Yes, no more hurting, all right?’

‘Alright, Mummy,’ he said, touching the funny hard bandage on her wrist.

He wondered if he should tell her about the woman, but he didn’t want to talk about it. It was horrid, and he didn’t want Mummy to cry. He didn’t like it when she cried. So he kept quiet.

‘Now, come on, let’s get you dressed. And guess what? We’re going to stay a few nights with Nana and Grandad!’

His face lit up.

‘Can we play with the dogs, like last time?’ he asked.

‘Of course we can,’ said Mummy, ‘but first, there are two nice men in the kitchen who want to have a quick chat with you, before we go.’

When they got downstairs, the sitting room door was shut and there were strange voices coming from inside.

‘Who’s in there, Mummy?’ George asked.

‘Just some cleaners, darling,’ his mother said, taking hold of his hand, ‘come on, let’s go into the kitchen.’

The two detectives were standing by the sink.

‘Well, hello young man,’ said one of them to George, kneeling down in front of him, ‘you’re looking smart today, are you off somewhere?’

‘We’re going to see Nana and Grandad.’

‘Good for you,’ the detective went on, offering him a biscuit, ‘did you sleep well, last night?’

George looked at his mother, who gave him an encouraging nod.

‘Yes,’ he answered, taking the biscuit. It was a custard cream, his favourite, and he was really hungry, ‘I went to sleep straight away and when I woke up Mummy was in bed with me.’

‘Was she indeed,’ said the detective, smiling at him, ‘and how old are you?’

‘Five and a half,’ said George.

‘Well done,’ said the detective, ‘was it noisy downstairs when you were trying to get to sleep?’ he went on casually, eating a biscuit himself.

The child had a sudden image of the woman and the knife going into Daddy. He shouldn’t have seen it. He should have been in bed. He’d been a bad boy.

‘No,’ he lied, ‘Daddy put me to bed and I didn’t get up.’

‘Good lad,’ said the detective, ‘and where was Mummy?’

‘Mummy had to go to A&B because she hurt her hand.’

‘A&E,’ said his mother, gently.

‘We know what he means,’ said the man with a smile.

‘How did you manage to do that, anyway?’ said the other detective to George’s mother, looking at her arm, which was in a sling with the plaster cast showing.

‘Oh I slipped on some water on the bathroom floor and cracked my wrist on the edge of the bath,’ she said.

‘Nasty,’ he replied.

George looked at her. He was about to say, ‘Daddy pushed her’, but the main detective ruffled his hair.

‘That’s all for now,’ he said, ‘off you go and have a good time with your Nana and Grandad.’

As they went through the hall, George noticed three small drops of red on the carpet. He wondered if Mummy had noticed too.

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Nana and Grandad were waiting outside by their car to pick them up and they both gave the child a hug.

‘Does he know what’s happened?’ Nana whispered to Rachael, as Grandad helped George into the back seat.

‘Not really,’ she answered, ‘but he does know that Michael won’t be coming back.’

‘Oh my Lord, what a terrible business,’ her mother said.

She’d never much cared for Michael as a son-in-law but she would never have wanted him murdered.

‘Who on earth could have done it?’ she said, looking pale and drawn.

As they drove off, she looked round at George in the back of the car, and gave him a smile.

‘Alright, my special boy?’ she asked him.

‘Yes Nana,’ he said snuggling in to his mother and sucking his thumb.

I thought he’d grown out of that, thought Nana.

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At her parent’s house, Rachael sat on the bed that she’d had as a teenager. George was downstairs with her mother who was making pancakes for him.

She was in a complete state of shock.

Who could possibly have wanted to kill Michael?

She found herself emotionally disconnected from what had happened the night before. She wouldn’t allow herself to feel relief but it was in her mind somewhere, despite the horror of it all.

Her marriage had become a nightmare since Michael started to abuse her, over the last few years. It was as if he was jealous of George and the time she devoted to him, and wanted to make her pay for loving the child more than she loved him.

She couldn’t tell her parents, her friends, or her sister. God knows what Michael would have done to her if she had. Slowly it had begun to sap her confidence, she lost weight and started looking scrawny, which he would often comment on.

She’d always managed to hide the cuts and bruises when he attacked her. He never touched her face, apart from slapping her, which left marks that were gone by the next day. It frequently happened in the evening after he’d had a few drinks but he could also suddenly turn on her at any odd moment of the day. It made her very nervous and jumpy. She was always walking on egg shells so as not to set him off.

Recently he’d started to punish George, if he thought he had been ‘a bad boy’. Telling him off too strongly, and sometimes shutting him in his room or smacking him on the back of his legs. Usually for no good reason.

It broke her heart – she couldn't bear it. She'd been trying to find the courage to take George and go to a refuge or something.

And now this.

Michael was dead. It was over.

It had been horrendous, finding Michael collapsed in a sea of blood when she got back from the hospital. He seemed to have been stabbed in his stomach and chest and both his wrists were slashed. He was completely still and she knew instinctively that he was dead. She ran upstairs in a blind panic to see if George was alright. Mercifully he was sound asleep and breathing peacefully. She closed his door and went quickly downstairs and phoned the police. They arrived about twenty minutes later and so did a doctor. While she was waiting, she'd sat in the kitchen, resting her plaster cast on the table and staring at nothing. She was in a complete state of shock, unable to collect her thoughts.

It made no sense. He'd been murdered. Who could have done it? Why? Nothing in the room was disturbed. The remains of some supper were still on the table with a bottle of red wine, half drunk, and a glass which had been knocked over, but that was all. She'd been gone for about six hours, she reckoned. A&E was incredibly busy and she'd had to wait ages to be seen, x-rayed, and have her wrist put in plaster.

Later on today, she had to go to the police station to talk further with the detectives. They were aware that she'd been at the hospital all evening so there was no fear of her being under suspicion. She'd tried to phone Michael several times during the evening, to check that George had gone to bed alright and to say it looked as if she was going to be there for some time, but he hadn't picked up, either on the home phone or his mobile. She'd left a message each time.

As she sat on her old bed, she waited for a huge sense of loss and grief to overwhelm her.

There was nothing.

She didn't realise until that moment that she had grown to hate him.

