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Philip Cox is married with two children and lives near London. He pursued a career in banking and financial services until 2009, when he took a break to become a stay-at-home father. In between numerous school runs, Philip wrote *After the Rain*, which appeared in 2011. *Dark Eyes of London* and *She's Not Coming Home* followed in 2012. *A Secret To Die For*, which introduced the maverick LAPD detective Sam Leroy, was published in 2013.

Also by Philip Cox

**After the Rain**

**Dark Eyes of London**

**Something to Die For**

**Don't Go Out in the Dark**

**Wrong Time to Die**

**Should Have Looked Away**

Version 4.1

**SHE'S NOT COMING  
HOME**

**PHILIP COX**

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This book is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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# Chapter One

IT WAS THE Day Before It Happened.

The third Tuesday in January.

The day after Martin Luther King Jr day, so to all intents and purposes it was the beginning of the working week.

‘Do you want eggs?’ Matthew Gibbons called out, his voice competing with the sound of Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny on the television and the first batch of eggs cooking on the stove.

No answer. Matt shrugged and continued stirring the eggs.

‘More Coco Snaps, Daddy,’ called out a voice from the table behind him.

‘Hold on a second,’ said Matt, quickly turning some eggs over.

‘I’ll get them, Daddy,’ came the reply.

‘No, wait. I’ll -’ Matt moved the pan off the stove and turned round, just in time to see his five year old son lean over and knock the cereal box on the floor, spilling its contents everywhere.

‘Oh, Nathan, no,’ Matt wailed as he knelt down to pick up the box.

‘Sorry, Daddy,’ said Nathan quietly.

Leaning over, Matt reached under the sink and pulled out a small dustpan and brush. He swept up the mess and emptied the grains into a bin. Stood up and put the box back on the table.

‘More Snaps, then?’

Nathan thought for a few seconds, then said, ‘No. I don’t think so.’

‘Fine. Want some eggs then? Or just toast?’

‘Just toast please, Daddy.’

‘Okay. Let me just finish the eggs.’

Matt turned back to the pan of eggs.

‘Just toast please, Daddy.’

‘Yes, I heard, sport. Just hold a second.’

‘And jelly.’

Matt raised his eyes. Was just about to say something when he heard footsteps coming down the stairs. He looked up as his wife Ruth wandered into the kitchen.

‘Do you want eggs?’ he asked again.

Ruth started to pour herself a cup of coffee.

‘French toast?’ she asked, taking a sip.

Matt said nothing. Just stared at her.

‘Forget the French toast. Eggs will be fine,’ Ruth said, sitting down at the table. She sniffed. ‘Don’t burn the bacon.’

‘Shoot.’ Matt pulled the tray of bacon from the stove. Just in time.

He served two plates of bacon strips and eggs and sat down at the table with Ruth and Nathan.

‘Daddy, you forgot the toast,’ said Nathan insistently just as Matt picked up a piece of bacon.

‘I’ll get it,’ Ruth mumbled as she got up and put a slice of bread in the toaster.

‘Two slices,’ said Nathan.

‘Two?’ asked Ruth. ‘You sure?’

‘Sure, Mommy. One for me and one for Mr Rex.’ Nathan held up a rubber Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Matt looked up. ‘I thought Mr Rex was a meat eater.’

Nathan grinned.

‘Silly me. One piece of toast. And some bacon for Mr Rex.’

Matt picked up a strip of bacon and tossed it over to his son.

‘You taking the car today?’ Matt asked as Ruth sat back down again. ‘Or walking?’

Ruth looked up at the wall clock. ‘Oh, I’ll walk in today. Take advantage of the fresh air. Then you can have the car at least.’

‘Well, don’t go across the common tonight.’

‘Do I ever in the dark?’ Ruth asked as she got up and buttered Nathan’s toast.

‘Well, come back via Charles.’

‘No. I’ll use Tremont and Beacon.’

‘Charles is quicker.’

‘Yeah, but my route is more interesting.’

Matt shrugged and finished his eggs.

‘What’s your plan for the day?’ Ruth asked, wiping her mouth and straightening her clothing.

‘Well, after I’ve dropped little Mr G off at Bambinos, I’ll double back here. I’ll need to fix that broken guttering out back and the handrail down to the cellar needs fixing.’

‘Should keep you busy.’

‘Only got two days vacation. Plan to make the most of it.’

‘You back to work Thursday, then?’

Matt finished his coffee. ‘U-huh.’

Ruth walked over to him. ‘Well, I’ll be off now. See you tonight.’ She reached up and kissed Matt, then leaned over to kiss Nathan on the top of the head. ‘Bye, sweetie.’

‘Bye to Mr Rex!’ Nathan called out, spraying the table with toast and jelly.

‘Bye Mr Rex!’ Ruth called out from the front door.

‘Right, Mister,’ Matt said after he heard the door close. ‘Time to get you ready for Bambinos.’

Half an hour later, Matt and Nathan were walking slowly down the street.

‘Are you coming to pick me up tonight?’ asked Nathan. ‘Or is Mommy?’

‘Me tonight, sport. I’m not at work today, but Mommy is. So you drew the short straw.’

Nathan frowned. ‘Short...?’

Matt laughed and ruffled his hair.

‘Forget it. I’ll pick you up tonight.’

Bambinos kindergarten was on Chestnut and Spruce, just three blocks away from Matt and Ruth’s. Matt kissed Nathan goodbye, said he would see him at four that afternoon, then walked back home, picking up that morning’s *Boston Herald* on the way back. Another cup of coffee while he scanned the newspaper and cleared away the breakfast things, then out to the garage for the stepladder to start his list of chores for the day. He had two days’ off from his job at the bank; or rather time off earned for working the last four Saturdays to cover absent colleagues. Either way, he intended to make the most of it.

He had lunch at twelve as he finished the *Herald*, then that cellar stair rail. At one o’clock precisely, his cell phone bleeped. As expected, it was a text from Ruth.

*Hi, hows ur day? x*

He replied: *v busy. cu tonite x*

He noticed the cellar walls needed a fresh coat of whitewash. A job for tomorrow.

It was beginning to get dark as he walked Nathan back home later. As they turned the corner into West Cedar Street he pulled his coat collar tighter and shivered. He looked over in



the direction of Boston Common. Ruth always enjoyed walking home, but on nights like this, he wished she had taken the car, or the bus.

'Come on, sport,' he said, ruffling Nathan's hair.

Being off, it was Matt's turn to prepare dinner. While Nathan sat on the couch watching Scooby-Doo, Matt made a start on the meal: fried chicken, green beans and mashed potato.

Just after five, his cell beeped again. *Leaving now x.*

*Ok x* he replied.

The digital clock on the stove read 5:42 as the front door opened and Ruth arrived home.

'Welcome home,' Matt said as they embraced.

'Glad to be home. Mm, that smells nice. Where's Nathan?' Ruth replied.

'In there watching TV.'

Ruth leaned into the other room.

'Hi, honey. Have a good day?'

'Yes, Mommy,' Nathan replied, his gaze not leaving the television screen.

'He's so interested,' Ruth said as she joined Matt in the kitchen.

'Come on honey,' said Matt as he handed her a glass of red wine. 'How can you compete with Scooby, Shaggy, and co?'

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The rest of the evening proceeded as normal. Matt told Ruth what he had done that day; Ruth did the same. Neither could find out exactly what Nathan had done at kindergarten, as he was only interested in Mr Rex and Mrs Brontosaurus. Then it was bath time for Nathan. Ruth read his bedtime story: a tale of three dinosaurs searching for a missing egg; the twentieth night in a row that he had wanted that story. When she came downstairs, Matt had just finished loading the dishwasher. He poured them both another glass of wine and they collapsed on the sofa.

'He asleep?' Matt asked.

'Went straight off.'

Matt smiled and leaned back on the sofa.

'What?' she asked.

'What what?'

'You were going to say something.'

Matt thought a second.

'Whatever it was, it's gone. What's the time, anyway?'

'Seven fifty.'

'That late, eh?'

'That late.'

They both took another mouthful of red wine and leaned back on the sofa. Matt slowly closed his eyes. By eight thirty they had both fallen asleep. Woke up around ten thirty and went to bed.

As he brushed his teeth, Matt started to feel amorous. It has been a busy day for both of them, but it was only ten forty-five...

He checked on Nathan, and walked back into his and Ruth's bedroom. Ruth was fast asleep. Matt got in beside her, leaned over, kissed her forehead, then lay down beside her.

He switched off the bedside lamps and was asleep in minutes.

Breakfast. Work. Dinner. Bed.

A normal day.

Their last normal day.

## Chapter Two

AT THAT TIME of year sunrise was just after seven and sunset at four thirty. It was still dark when Matt awoke the next morning. Still heavy eyed, he checked his watch. It was six forty. On a normal weekday, he would get up at just after seven. Ruth would follow twenty minutes or so later, as Matt always liked to be first in the shower. If Nathan had not woken by himself by seven thirty, then one of them would wake him. After a normally hurried breakfast Ruth would set off for her job in the Boston offices of Cambridge Pharmaceuticals. She worked just under two miles from home and most days walked to and from the office. If the weather was too bad, and it was only heavy rain that affected her routine, she would take the bus. She could drive, but hated the regular gridlock on Boston's streets. Her morning route would take her across Boston Common between Beacon Street and Tremont Street and would take her twenty-five minutes. On the way home during the winter months when it was dark, mainly due to Matt's insistence, she would in effect walk around the park, up Tremont as far as the Park Street subway station, up Park Street, then along Beacon as far as Spruce, to resume her normal route. This circumnavigation of the Common would add another ten to fifteen minutes to her journey.

Ruth tended to leave around eight fifteen, ten minutes or so earlier if it was her turn to drop Nathan off at Bambinos. Matt would leave ten minutes later, unless it was his turn to drop off Nathan. Matt worked as a Personal Banker for the Bank of New England in the bank's branch in the Custom House District. He would generally drive, braving the traffic. As Personal Banker, he had the luxury of a parking space at the rear of the bank. The bank opened its doors at 9:30, and Matt would arrive a few minutes before nine.

This morning seemed to be starting differently. In the darkness of their bedroom, Matt turned over and felt for Ruth's sleeping body. Maybe they could start the day doing what he was hoping to finish the previous day doing...

Instead of Ruth's waist the first thing Matt could feel was the sheet. He moved his hand around searching for Ruth, but found nothing. Sleepily, he half sat up and looked across to her side. It was empty. He sat up further, blinking. He thought he could just make out the sound of the shower running. He pulled his hand out from under the covers. Ruth's side felt cold to the touch; she must have been up for a while.

He checked the time again, groaned, and lay back down, rubbing his eyes. A few seconds later he reached over and switched on the small bedside light. The room was bathed in a faint yellow light.

At that moment the bedroom door opened and Ruth came in. She was wrapped in a black towel and rubbing her hair with a smaller matching towel.

'How long have you been up for?' Matt asked, still not fully awake.

Ruth looked over at the gold carriage clock on her dresser.

'Half an hour or so, I guess,' she answered, sitting down at the dresser. She picked up a brush and started to brush her wet hair.

'Couldn't you sleep then?' Matt asked, now sitting up on the bed.

'No.'

A little surprised at the brevity of his wife's reply, Matt stood up, fumbled in his shorts, then shuffled over to the bedroom door.

‘Might as well get up myself,’ he said quietly, scratching the back of his head.

‘You don’t need to. It’s still early.’

‘Too late. I’m awake now.’

As he wandered down the hallway to the bathroom, he stuck his head round the half opened door to Nathan’s room. In the faint green glow of the night-light, he could see the top of Nathan’s head, sharing the pillow with a plastic stegosaurus. Nathan stirred slightly as Matt gently closed the door.

As he stepped into the shower, Matt could hear Ruth switch on the hair dryer. He showered himself, shampooed his hair – twice, as he normally did – then blindly reached out of the shower cubicle for the towel rail. Almost dry, he wrapped the towel around his waist, and returned to the bedroom. As he passed Nathan’s room, the door slowly opened, and his son was standing in the doorway, blinking and scratching the top of his head. Clinging onto Mr Stegosaurus, he was wearing blue and yellow pyjamas decorated with various dinosaurs.

‘Good morning, sport,’ Matt said, ruffling his son’s hair. ‘Sleep well?’

Nathan nodded, yawning.

‘You want to come in and watch some TV while Mommy and I get up?’ Matt asked.

Nathan nodded and shuffled after his father.

‘Look who I found outside,’ said Matt as he returned to the bedroom.

‘Morning sweetie,’ said Ruth, turning round as she dried her hair. Nathan jumped up onto his parents’ bed, reached over for the TV remote, switched it on, and tabbed down to a cartoon channel. Ruth turned round and continued with her hair.

Matt was the first to get dressed. ‘I’ll go put the coffee on,’ he said. ‘Come with me, sport; let’s get you dressed.’

After getting Nathan dressed, Matt went down to the kitchen and started the coffee. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ruth come in the kitchen.

‘You want eggs?’ he asked, pouring out two cups of coffee.

Ruth said nothing.

‘Well?’ Matt said, passing her a cup.

‘Well what?’ she asked.

‘Do you want eggs?’

Ruth sipped her coffee and looked at him blankly.

‘Eggs?’

‘Sorry, miles away. No, no eggs thanks. Think I’ll just have this.’

Matt shrugged.

‘Suit yourself. Where’s Nathan?’

‘He- oh, he’s still upstairs playing with the dinosaurs.’

‘He’d better come down for breakfast,’ said Matt walking to the foot of the stairs. ‘Or he’ll be late for Bambinos. Nathan! Breakfast!’ he called out. Shortly they could hear Nathan’s footsteps running down the stairs. Now clutching both a stegosaurus and a tyrannosaurus rex, he sat up at the table.

‘Cereal and toast?’ Matt asked.

‘Yes please, Daddy,’ answered Nathan, as the T Rex began to chase the stegosaurus around the table.

‘I’ll take Nathan to Bambinos today, if you like,’ said Ruth from the back of the kitchen.

‘No, it’s all right, I’m off today -’

‘I can walk in via Bambinos. Drop him off on the way.’

‘Fine by me. I can make an early start.’

‘Early start on what?’

‘Whatever I do today. Might start off by tidying up downstairs.’

‘Mm. Good idea.’ Ruth finished her coffee and stood up. ‘I’m just going upstairs to get

ready for work. Nathan, ten minutes, okay?’

‘Okay, Mommy.’

Nathan finished his toast and ran upstairs to brush his teeth. Then he and Ruth reappeared in the doorway, ready to go. Matt went over to kiss his son goodbye.

‘Have a nice day, sport,’ he said, bending down. ‘Don’t be too hard on Mrs Hardy.’

‘Harding,’ corrected Nathan.

‘Harding. Right. I’ll pick you up this afternoon.’ More of a question, directed at Ruth.

Ruth nodded. Reached up and kissed Matt.

‘See you,’ she said, and led Nathan to the front door. Her hand stopped at the lock and she turned back and went over to Matt, who was still in the kitchen doorway. She reached up and kissed Matt again, more tenderly than before brushing her fingers down his cheek. She smiled and went back to the door, where Nathan was waiting.

‘See you both tonight,’ said Matt. ‘Pizza okay for you, sport?’

‘Yes please, Daddy.’

‘Pizza okay?’ he mouthed at Ruth.

‘Sure,’ she nodded, then opened the door and left with Nathan.

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Not having anything particular planned, Matt intended to have a leisurely day. A few chores to attend to, but nothing major. Just to potter about in the house and the yard, pick up Nathan, then prepare dinner. As dinner was frozen pizza, the meal wouldn’t need much preparation.

Mid-afternoon, he strolled round to Bambinos, picking up a *Herald* on the way.

‘We still having pizza tonight?’ asked Nathan as they walked home.

‘Sure thing, sport.’

‘Cool,’ said Nathan, as he skipped along next to his father.

Just before five, Matt took some trash out to the garbage can. It had been dark for some time, a cold wind was picking up, and it was beginning to rain. Once back inside, he shivered and picked up his cell phone.

*Beginning 2 rain, why not get bus?* he texted Ruth, knowing what her response would be. There needed to be at least twelve inches of snow before she gave up her walk home.

Sure enough, a couple of minutes later came the reply: *leaving now*.

Matt laughed, shook his head, and switched the oven on to cook the pizza. The clock on the stove read 5:05. Ruth should be home around 5:45. The pizzas should be ready about then.

At 5:50 he turned off the oven and pulled out the well-cooked pizzas.

‘I’m hungry,’ said Nathan, who had wandered in from watching TV in the den. ‘Where’s Mommy?’

‘Just running a bit late, sport,’ said Matt. ‘Should be home by six.’

But Ruth didn’t come home by six.

Or seven.

Or eight.

# Chapter Three

POLICE LIEUTENANT DETECTIVE Sam Weber shifted in his chair. After two hours sitting in the same spot, it was becoming really uncomfortable. His partner, Detective Frances Mancini, looked over.

‘Getting restless? You want another coffee?’ she asked, standing up and stretching.

‘Yeah; go on,’ Weber grunted. He stood up, stretched, and hitched his pants up. As Mancini walked down the hospital corridor to the vending machines, Weber tucked his shirt more into his pants. Strange, he thought: would have thought the more weight you put on, the tighter your clothes would get. Seemed to be the opposite with him. Maybe he should set about losing some weight. Last time he checked, he was 210 pounds; overweight according to the department medic. That’s the price you pay, he told the doc, when all you eat is fast food on stakeouts. And your wife leaves you for a twenty year old. And you give up smoking.

‘Why not eat healthier?’ the doctor had asked. ‘More salads for example?’

‘Doc, you gotta be kidding,’ Weber had replied. ‘If you think I’m sitting all night in the freezing rain and snow eating just a Caesar salad, you’re on a different planet.’

He watched Mancini as she walked back with two paper cups. Hell, she kept her figure. But then she was fifteen years younger than him, and probably got more exercise.

‘Here you go, Sam,’ she said, passing him a cup of black coffee. ‘Number six, is it?’

‘You forgot breakfast. Eight or nine,’ he grunted, swigging back some coffee.

‘Jeez, if I had that many in one day I’d be walking on the ceiling.’

Weber looked at his watch.

‘It’s just after eight now,’ he said. ‘Assuming she doesn’t wake up between now and nine, then we’re out of here.’

Weber and Mancini were in the Massachusetts General Hospital. Around midday they had taken a call about a mugging at the Brigham Circle T station. The attack had left the victim, a woman in her sixties, unconscious. The only two people who witnessed the attack, albeit from a distance, described the assailants as white youths wearing hoods. Both witnesses said the two ran down Huntingdon Avenue. Weber and Mancini drove around the Huntingdon area in case they saw anybody answering that description, but had no luck. It all happened out of range of any CCTV cameras, so Weber and Mancini’s best option was to wait for Ms Washington to regain consciousness.

The ambulance went direct to Massachusetts General, or MGH. The nearest hospital to the Brigham Circle was in fact the Beth Israel facility on Brookline, but since just before last Christmas had been partly closed for refurbishment, so the nearest was Mass General, a couple of miles further on. Weber and Mancini arrived just after the ambulance, at just before one o’clock. They had no option but to wait for Ms Washington to regain consciousness, but five hours later she had not done so. At seven they would be relieved by the night duty, unless she woke before then, in which case they would leave after they had taken her statement. They both had mixed feelings: keen to get away after a twelve hour shift, but determined to catch whoever had given this little old lady the head injuries she had sustained.

Whilst waiting, they had speculated on the motive for the attack. Quite early on, they had dismissed race as a motive, as the attack was quick, opportunistic, and her purse had been taken. Assuming she was carrying anything. Violent crime had been a problem in that part of

the city for some time; in fact statistically a person had a 1 in 101 chance of being a victim in the past five years.

‘Eight forty.’ Weber stepped over to the door of the room where Ms Washington was lying. He peered through the small rectangular window. She was still in a coma.

‘Is it true,’ asked Mancini, ‘that the longer they’re unconscious for, the lower the chances of her waking up?’

Weber looked over at his partner. He shrugged.

‘Possibly. Possibly not.’

Mancini looked through the window.

‘She looks so sad, lying alone there.’

‘Eh?’

‘All alone, I mean. No relatives at her bedside.’

‘Well, until she wakes up, or somebody reports her missing, or somebody finds her purse with all her ID, she’ll only have us at her bedside.’

‘She must have been on her way to work,’ said Mancini. ‘Hence the name badge. She must be missed there.’

‘Or on her way home. Nobody at home to miss her. No wedding band, remember. No ID. Just a little blue badge,’ said Weber, looking through the glass again. ‘Celeste Washington,’ he muttered. ‘Who are you?’

‘Sam, it’s time,’ said Mancini. Weber looked round and saw Detectives Anderson and Troy walking down the corridor. The night shift.

‘Hey guys,’ said Troy. ‘No luck yet, I take it?’

‘Nah,’ said Weber. ‘Nothing yet.’

‘O’Riordan wants us to stay here for the duration if need be,’ Anderson said. ‘Says to catch these bastards is a priority.’

‘He wants you to stay here all night?’ asked Weber.

‘He figures the old lady probably won’t make it, so it’ll be a homicide. More pressure to clear that up. Says even if she comes round for a while, she might give us something to go on.’

Weber shrugged. ‘Guess we’ll leave you to it then. Relieve you here in the morning. Unless something happens in the meantime,’ he added.

‘Sure,’ said Troy as he and Anderson took their places on the orange plastic chairs.

‘I bet you twenty bucks,’ said Weber as he and Mancini walked back to their car, ‘that she won’t make it. She’s been like that for too long.’

‘Then it’s murder.’

‘You got it in one.’

Just as they reached their car, Weber’s cell phone rang.

‘It’s O’Riordan,’ he said as he pressed the button to answer. Mancini sat in the car while her partner took the call.

‘What is it?’ she asked as he joined her in the car.

‘O’Riordan called to ask a favour.’

‘Which we can’t turn down.’

‘Mm. Anyway, a call’s come in about a reported missing person over in Beacon Hill.’

‘Not her back there?’

‘Unlikely. Did she look to you as if she came from Beacon Hill?’

‘Not really.’

‘No. Some guy’s wife three or four hours overdue from work. Asked if we could go over, take some details to pass over to the MPU.’

‘Why us? Surely he knows we’re on overtime now?’

‘He said we’re the nearest. Should only take half hour or so.’

‘Great,’ said Mancini, fastening her seat belt. ‘Another night when I don’t see my kids.’

Weber started the car and pulled away. Turned into Fruit Street then left into Charles. A couple of minutes later he pulled up outside the Charles/MGH T station.

‘What are you doing?’ Mancini asked.

‘Get the subway home,’ said Weber. ‘I can take care of this.’

‘You sure?’

‘Get out before I change my mind. Go kiss your kids goodnight.’

‘Will you be okay?’

‘It’s Beacon Hill. I should be all right,’ Weber said sarcastically.

‘Lieutenant, I owe you one.’

‘Tell me about it. Now get.’

After Mancini had left, Weber took the car along Cambridge, then down W Cedar. Pulled up outside the address he had been given. He got out of the car and looked around. With its red-brick Federalist townhouses and vintage gaslights, this street was typical of those in Beacon Hill, one of the most exclusive residential neighbourhoods of the city. Some months ago, he was involved in a case in an apartment building a few blocks away from here. The case involved the beneficiary of an elderly woman’s will trying to sell her apartment. Only thing is, the woman wasn’t dead yet. Weber remembered the place was on the market for close to half a million dollars; slightly underpriced according to the real estate agent. This house here - Weber assumed three bedrooms, maybe two bathrooms, a yard out back, a garage somewhere - must be close to a million, maybe more. He wondered if that was why O’Riordan wanted this guy interviewed tonight. Would have had to have waited till morning if it had been some other parts of the city.

Weber took a deep breath, climbed the four steps to the front door, and rang the doorbell.

# Chapter Four

MATT LOOKED ANXIOUSLY at the kitchen clock. It read six twenty. Nathan was busy munching his fourth slice of pizza, oblivious to his father's concern. Matt picked up his phone and sent Ruth a text, asking where she was, was she okay?

After five minutes there was still no answer, so he rang her number. After six rings, it went to voicemail.

'Hi, it's me. Where are you? Have you stopped off somewhere on the way? Call me back soon as you can.'

He pressed the red button to disconnect and, rubbing his chin with the phone, walked to the front door. Looking back to check that Nathan was still occupied, he opened the front door and stood at the foot of the four steps that led down from their door to the street. He looked up and down the street. A couple of cars went past and a man and a woman walked by the other side of the road. Matt looked down the road, in the direction of Mount Vernon Street, searching for Ruth's figure coming up the road. He saw nothing. What the hell was keeping her? It was unlikely, he thought, that something had happened to her walking home, a mugging or such like; the route she took was well-lit and at this time of the evening there were still plenty of people around. Unless she went across the common. When it was still light at this time, she would take a shortcut using one of the many paths across Boston Common, past the Boston Massacre Monument, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on Flagstaff Hill, and the Founder's Monument just as she approached Beacon Street. Sometimes she would pause a while by Frog Pond, to do some people watching.

Matt had never been a great fan of the Common: it was never maintained to the standard of the parks he was used to back home, and even he would make a point of avoiding it after dusk. The north west corner of the park was the location of Park Street subway station, and since an incident two or three years ago when he, Ruth and Nathan were approached by one of the many panhandlers congregating around the station environs, he would always try an alternative route. Especially if he was with Nathan. He had turned down the guy's request to stand him for a meal, and, expecting him to move onto someone else, was surprised and unnerved when he followed them right up to Beacon Street, shouting at them.

He would frequently check with Ruth that she was not walking across the Common after dark, and she would always confirm she took the street route. The pathways across the park were used by tourists heading for the Visitor Center on Tremont, although rarely after dark, and by pedestrian commuters on their way to and from the office towers. Like Ruth. In all the time they had lived there, he could not recall an incident on the Common with a commuter, but Matt was naturally cautious. Ruth would always say he was being too cautious, and she was quite safe walking home, even in the dark. Maybe it was the fact that she had grown up on the streets of Boston, whereas Matt had not.

He turned back up the stairs and went back indoors, closing the door. Joined Nathan in the kitchen.

'Enjoying your pizza, sport?' he asked.

'Mm,' replied Nathan, his mouth full. 'When's Mommy coming home?'

'Soon,' Matt said distractedly. 'Soon. She – she's been held up at work, and so she'll be a bit late home.'



‘Can I have some more pizza?’ asked Nathan.

Matt looked over at him. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Have a piece of mine.’ He passed over a slice from his plate. Suddenly he was not so hungry.

It was now six forty. He rang Ruth’s cell again, hanging up before it went to voicemail. Maybe she had been delayed after all. He found his contacts list, tabbed to the entry *Ruth – Office* and dialled. The line clicked a few times, then he heard an automated voice telling him his call could not be completed as dialled. Wrong number. Strange: maybe he had programmed his phone incorrectly; he would always use Ruth’s cell phone when he contacted her. He called 411 and gave name and address of where Ruth worked. He dialled this number, which was nothing like the number he had on his cell, and listened. The number rang four or five times, then a recorded message saying that the offices were now closed and would reopen at 9am the next morning.

He hung up and decided to try some friends. Tabbed down to the number for Ruth’s best friend, Gail Smith, and dialled. As he waited for a ring tone, he thought about Gail. She lived the other side of the city, so it was unlikely that Ruth would have gone there; maybe they had arranged to meet up after work, and Ruth had forgotten to tell him. Or had, and he had forgotten.

‘Nathan,’ he called out. ‘Did Mommy say anything about Auntie Gail the other day? About meeting her?’

‘No,’ said Nathan, as he threw Mr Tyrannosaurus up and down. ‘Daddy, can I have some ice cream now?’

‘I’m just on the phone. Help yourself. Not too much now. Just two scoops.’

Gail’s phone rang five or six times, then went to voicemail. Matt left a message, then hung up. Who else to call? No point calling his parents, and Ruth had none. Or rather they had both died a few years before he and Ruth met.

Rubbing the side of his phone, Matt returned to the kitchen. He took a slice of cold pizza from his plate, and started to chew. It took a long time to chew; he had lost his appetite. Nathan, on the other hand, had covered his face with chocolate ice cream.

‘It’s getting late, sport,’ said Matt. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up and in the bath.’

‘When’s Mommy back?’ Nathan asked.

‘A bit later. If you’ll already asleep, she’ll go up and tuck you in.’

After twenty minutes in the bath and a bedtime story – involving dinosaurs – Nathan was tucked up in bed. He yawned.

‘When Mommy gets home, you will get her to come up and tuck me in again, won’t you?’

‘Promise,’ whispered Matt, kissing Nathan on the forehead and straightening his quilt. He turned the night light on and the room light off.

‘Night, sport,’ he whispered from the bedroom doorway. There was no answer: Nathan was asleep already.

Matt quietly made his way downstairs and back into the kitchen. Threw away his uneaten pizza and put the dishes into the dishwasher. Dialled Gail’s number again. Left the same message again.

He went online, found local news pages for the online pages for the *Herald*, the *Globe*, and the *Beacon Hill Times*. Looked for any traffic reports, any accidents. Any crimes reported for that evening. It was probably too early, he reflected.

He tried ringing Ruth’s phone again, and Gail’s. Both times the call went to voicemail; both times he left the same message as before.

He stepped outside again, and looked up and down the street. No sign of anybody. A bus roared past the end of the street, along Mount Vernon. He went back indoors.

He wondered about putting Nathan in the back of the car and driving round the streets looking for Ruth, but decided against this as it would be unlikely he would see her in the

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