

The
MARGARET
CODE

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**RICHARD
HOOTON**



When I was younger I could remember anything,
whether it happened or not; but I am getting old,
and soon I shall remember only the latter.

– Mark Twain

PROLOGUE

Our transistor radio, perched on the kitchen counter, fills the silence. Andy Williams's golden timbre: 'Moon River'.

You enter the room, Albert. Take my hand as if it's a gift.
'May I have the pleasure, Margaret?'

Merriment sparkles in your deep voice. You pull me into an embrace. The woody, citrus fragrance of Floris No. 89.

This could be our first dance: hesitant, a stranger's body close, uncertain where to place feet and hands.

It's a struggle to move creaking joints and aching muscles. Your hands support me, somehow firm and gentle. Steadfast. We find our rhythm, movements mirroring, we're one with the tune. The cold linoleum becomes Blackpool Tower Ballroom's warm, sprung floorboards, and slowly the decades fall away.

One-two-three. Rise and fall.

My summer dress sways, our steps light and loose. You whisper three wonderful words in my ear that I haven't heard for so long.

The radio crackles occasionally. No trouble, the melody's within.

Our shadows stretch across the floor, and suddenly I am

uneasy. This could be our last dance: holding on for dear life. I can't bear for the song to end. I close my eyes, willing us to stay in this moment forever. But the night is already fading, and you're falling from my grip.

CHAPTER 1

A beautiful blue light dances effortlessly across the ceiling. It illuminates our bedroom, helping my eyes adjust to the dark.

Curious noises intrude on night's stillness: car doors shutting, hurried footsteps, urgent voices. The golden bells of our alarm clock, which sits alone on the bedside table, glow eerily. I struggle to make out the tiny hands. It's one o'clock, I think.

I look across to where you lie, Albert, always on my left. That side of the bed is empty. I sit up. You've always favoured sleeping nearest the door.

'So I can leap up to protect you if anyone bursts into the room,' you sometimes say, your bony fists raised in the mock pose of a boxer.

'Would be just my blooming luck if they snuck in through the window,' I'll shoot back.

We both know full well that you sleep nearest the door so as not to disturb me in the night when you go to the loo. Up and down like a fiddler's elbow.

The blue light whirls across our cream ceiling. My head is a little muzzy. I lie back down and close my eyes, waiting for

sleep to wash over me. Tyres grumble over gravel. A squeak of brakes. More car doors clanging.

My mind is alert to the sounds. Once the synapses are firing it can be difficult to switch off.

Snippets of conversation drift into earshot like clues to a crossword puzzle: ‘secured the scene’, ‘officers stationed’, ‘means of entry’.

It’s no use. I have to investigate.

Lifting the duvet, I slowly swivel my legs until they’re out of the bed’s warmth. Lowering them to the ground, I ease myself upright. Cold air nips my ankles. I put on my non-slip slippers, then switch on the light. The click matches the sound of my hip as I turn. I wrap my flannel dressing gown around myself, pulling the cord tight and fastening it into a bow. Opening the curtains, I peer out.

Several police cars are parked at odd angles across the street as if discarded by a tornado. Their blue lights spin towards me. At first, I think the uniformed officers are stationed outside Jean Brampton’s house, opposite. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, I realise it’s the one next door, it’s Barbara’s house.

Oh, what on Earth has happened? I’ve no choice but to get out there to find out. I can’t sit around waiting for you to finish in the bathroom. You’ll be in there forever.

The floorboards from bedroom to staircase creak louder than my joints. At what point did my body become my enemy? Niggles that once disappeared became aches, aches became pains. My body seems to have forgotten how to repair itself. Unlike that Doctor Who you love to watch on a Saturday night, it’s lost the ability to regenerate. Our real doctor’s still debating whether I need a hip replacement – ‘I’m concerned about an

operation at your age, Margaret' – so I have to put up with it and use that blasted stick when it gets too sore. Still, mustn't grumble.

The bathroom door is shut, a sliver of light spilling from beneath. The trickle of a running tap. Nothing wrong with my hearing, as you well know.

'I'm going outside to see what all the fuss is about.'

No answer. Deaf as a doorpost without your hearing aid in.

'Deaf from all your nagging,' you often say. With a smile. Always with a smile.

Something else niggles at my smoggy brain. Never mind. I grip the staircase's wooden rail and focus on the task in hand. Oh, to be able to slide down the banister with the glee of a child! I resist the urge. I'd only end up a crumpled heap in the hallway for you to discover in the morning.

I descend one step at a time. Everyone will have gone by the time I get out there.

Finally reaching the bottom of the stairs, I unlock the front door and haul it open to be greeted by a blast of icy air. Goosebumps crowd my skin. I grit my remaining teeth and venture outside. The night air is stodgy with petrol fumes. So many police officers. Must be serious. Though I'm always reading in the paper about them rushing off to some petty incident while not attending when something disastrous happens.

One officer is standing outside Barbara's gate, staring straight ahead. Behind him, blue and white tape bearing the words POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS twists in the wind. Another officer is standing with his back to me, next to a panda car at the foot of our drive. I shuffle towards him, the concrete chill permeating my slippers. I've not been out this late in years. Not

since we went ballroom dancing, decades ago when we laughed and twirled into the night. I reach our gate. How different the street looks at this hour without daytime's revealing light, the houses and gardens shrouded in darkness and mystery. The stars are pinpricks in the blackness; their radiance still with us, despite some of them burning out long ago.

I reach the policeman. Tap him on the shoulder.

'What's going on?'

He jolts around, then regains his composure. 'Sorry, madam. Didn't see you there.'

He says nothing else, so I stare at him intently.

'Nothing to see out here,' he says, eventually. 'Best you go back inside.'

'But what's happened at Barbara's place?'

'I don't know, but you'll catch your death out here.'

Policemen really are getting younger these days. He can't be much older than our James, who's what, fifteen now? He too has spots and no sign of stubble. The policeman looks downcast. Maybe this isn't what he had in mind when he signed up.

'I can't go back in without knowing how she is.'

He doesn't look at me but round me. I don't have to hear a sigh, it's there in his crestfallen expression. The bitter wind whips around us.

'Honestly, I don't know myself. Now I must insist you go back inside.'

'Don't tell me what to do, young man.' I pull my dressing-gown cord tighter and refasten the bow. 'This is a free country and you're right outside my doorstep.'

A policewoman gets out of the car, alerted by the raised voices no doubt.

‘You all right, love?’ She smiles insipidly. ‘You really shouldn’t be out dressed like that on such a cold night.’

‘I’m worried about my neighbour.’

Unease is growing in the pit of my stomach. All these officers. That tape. No answers. There was something I needed to remember about Barbara. But what?

‘We’re still establishing the circumstances.’ The police officer’s voice is lilting, intended as a balm. ‘Once we know more, we’ll let you know. For now, you’d be much more comfortable in the warmth of your home.’

The icy wind picks up. Even the policeman’s teeth are chattering. They don’t make them tough any more. And they’re not as good as that nice Bergerac. You never come across one as lovely as that.

It’s no good. They’re not going to tell me. I let her guide me back inside. The young policeman looks relieved.

We stand in the hallway, the front door ajar.

‘What’s your name, love?’ the policewoman asks.

‘It’s Mrs Winterbottom.’

In the unforgiving hallway light, I can see her face more clearly. Glossy, auburn hair cascades from beneath her hat, framing her pretty face. My lank, grey locks hang dismally around mine. Her skin is taut and smooth, mine crumpled by wrinkles. Her complexion is so clear that she mustn’t have had time yet for the sort of troubles that leave a mark.

Sympathy invades her eyes. I don’t want that. I haven’t asked for that. I just want to be treated the same as anyone else and given God’s honest truth. I know how she sees me. She’ll find herself old one day. You can’t stop that with crime prevention advice.

‘Now, Mrs Winterbottom, there’s nothing you can do to help at this time of night, so I think it’s best if you head back to bed. We’ll be able to tell you more in the morning once things are a little clearer.’

People always think they know what’s blooming best for you when you get to our age, Albert.

‘I won’t be able to sleep thinking that something’s happened to Barbara.’

‘You mustn’t worry yourself. Once you’re tucked up in bed, you’ll soon drift away.’

She’s not telling me that everything will be all right though. It’s what they don’t tell you that’s important. Six decades in our safe haven of Garnon Crescent without a single crime and now something dreadful must have happened. There’s been the odd cross word now and again, I grant you, but nothing to attract the attention of the law.

‘Can you at least tell me that she’s OK?’

She looks past me. ‘Are you here on your own, Mrs Winterbottom? Is there anyone I can call for you?’

The words jar something inside me. I stare at her. The crisp fresh air has cleared my mind and a cold knowledge buried within is creeping through me. I glance upstairs, thinking of the shut bathroom door, the trickle of the tap. Then shake my head. Suddenly, I want her to leave.

‘Well, just make sure you lock the door,’ the policewoman says breezily as she steps outside. ‘Though you couldn’t be safer with all these strong, handsome policemen guarding your front gate.’

I shut the door behind her with a thud. Lock it as instructed. Trudge back upstairs. I enter the bathroom. It’s empty. I turn off the tap. Switch off the light.

Once in our bedroom I gaze out the window. Curtains are twitching in neighbouring houses. Word will soon spread.

I scan Barbara's house. No shattered window or battered door. No blackened frames or trails of smoke. Her garden so neat and tidy, just like her. Not an inkling of disturbance.

I look to our bed, Albert, where you've lain beside me for sixty years. Your pillow remains plumped. The duvet carefully tucked in on your side. That blue light swirls in discordant patterns that make me feel nauseous.

More lights stream through the darkness. An ambulance approaches, parks outside Barbara's house. Its back doors swing wide open. Paramedics wheel a stretcher from within and pass under the tape. I catch my breath. My best friend, my friend of fifty years, one of my few remaining friends. Tears prick my eyes, but I will not cry.

After an age, they bring the stretcher back out, now bearing a weight completely covered with a white sheet.

That memory slaps me, Albert. Of when they took you away and you didn't return. Of that morning when the sun didn't rise. The blue light cold and silent.

I didn't know a heart could break twice, but that agony is burning in my chest once again.