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Plante

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*Chrissie Most, for her friendship, kindness and fun.
You will be truly missed.*

EUSTON STATION

He has wasted weeks, including a couple of nights, at Paddington and Charing Cross stations, trying to spread out the hunt so that it was safer, and remaining wary of CCTV cameras, knowing exactly how far away from the stations he needed to be before he was in the clear. He knew it was imperative that he never created any suspicion, but it's been frustrating.

And so tonight, he was returning to his old hunting ground. But with one new added dimension: saving the cash required to be allowed into Euston station's First Class Lounge, via the cheapest ticket he could purchase.

Choosing a table with a complete view of the station's concourse below the bay window, he helped himself to a free coffee and a pastry. Wearing rimless glasses, a black hoodie with jeans and sneakers, and carrying a non-descript canvas haversack, to all intents and purposes he appeared to be a university graduate. Sitting with his back to the rest of the lounge, he was relieved that it was virtually empty. From his position he could watch passengers coming and going, and all the train departures and arrivals were on screens clearly visible from his position. Taking out his mobile phone, he appeared to be concentrating on messages and texting, while in reality, his concentration was on Platform 1, awaiting the arrival of a train from Liverpool Lime Street. This had been very productive on previous occasions.

Finishing his coffee, he took an old takeaway coffee beaker from his haversack in readiness, as the arriving passengers began to stream out onto the station's concourse. Surrounded by cafés and fast-food stalls, newsagents and book shops, his focus was directed on the passengers with their trollies and wheelie suitcases. As groups of family and friends waited outside the platform's exit gate, he

began to feel very agitated that after all his planning it looked as if he was out of luck.

The last straggling passengers had walked out of the exit gate when his antenna kicked into action. She was very petite, with blonde hair worn in a thick twisted knot. Wearing a short mini skirt with rubber-soled ankle boots and a cheap parka puffa jacket. Over her shoulder she had a large dirty white canvas bag with wide straps and what looked like a sleeping bag wrapped around with straps. He would have to learn quickly if she was meeting up with friends, intending to camp out somewhere with them. She seemed disorientated, standing by the exit gate as the grille was drawn closed. Looking around, she headed towards one of the empty seats available for passengers and paused by a stand offering various tourist attractions and free tube maps. Picking one out, she turned to look over towards the sign for the exit down to the tube trains, then concentrated on reading the tube station map.

From the First Class Lounge it took only a few minutes for him to walk across the concourse towards her. Prepared in advance was the takeaway coffee beaker, and as he made the last few steps towards her, he jolted forwards, virtually into her arms. To any casual onlooker it would look like a friend hugging her.

'I am so sorry, goodness, here let me mop this mess up.'

He had spilt the cold watery coffee from his beaker over her canvas bag, and quickly took out some tissues from his pocket to dab at the stain. She was much younger than he had first thought, a teenager with bad acne and bitten fingernails.

'It's alright, didn't get any over me.' She had a strong Northern accent.

He gently dabbed at the stain on her canvas bag. 'I don't think I've done too much damage, but I was hurrying for the tube station. Are you catching a train?'

'No, I've only just arrived. Don't worry about me bag, honestly.'

'Well, I've probably missed the train I was hurrying to get, so can I buy you a coffee? Or are you waiting for someone?'

'No, I'm on me own. I've never been to London before. In fact I was just checking out the tube station. Never been on one of them either.'

She gave a nervous laugh, then checked the stain on her bag. 'It's not too bad, so thanks.'

'What's your name?'

'Heather.'

'Well, I apologise, Heather. If you like I can walk you down to the tube. Whereabouts are you heading?'

Almost without any hesitation they began to walk towards the exit for the tube station. He'd picked up her sleeping bag by the strap, insisting he carry it for her, at the same time asking where she was staying. He had played out this routine so many times and knew his next moves would be eventually getting her onto the tube near to where he lived, then offering her not just a coffee but stopping off for a hamburger. It would not be too difficult to subsequently offer her a place to stay. Only once before had his instinct failed.

Heading down to the tube station it was imperative that he give her no hint of interest that might alarm her. It was important that he gained her trust. She was intending to go to Piccadilly Circus, telling him that she had been told by a friend that she might find her there, or over at the Embankment.

When he offered to accompany her and look for her friend, Heather appeared quite relieved. She was concerned that her old flip-top mobile might need to be charged as she had hoped to do it on the train but didn't have the right lead. By the time they had alighted at Piccadilly it was after ten, and they sat by the Eros Statue for a while before Heather started to become fretful. He looked at his own mobile, checking the time as if concerned about getting home, but at the same time saying he was worried about leaving her on her own,

even though there were a lot of tourists around. He asked her if she had any other contacts, suggesting that perhaps he could call them for her on his mobile. She started chewing at her nails and shaking her head.

The offer of a hamburger and fries with a milk shake made her hesitate, even telling him that she should be the one offering as he had been so helpful. He didn't insist but said he was definitely hungry. He knew a cheap place they could get a burger from a street stand. It was important that by now he knew she had very little money, but there was one element he needed to find out before he wasted any more time.

They walked up Shaftesbury Avenue as the theatres spilled out their audiences. Already there were a few homeless people taking up their positions outside the empty theatre exits. He watched Heather looking towards one young man and he bent down towards her and whispered that he was glad he was not in that position as it was very risky sleeping rough.

The stall was close to the Shaftesbury Theatre, and sometimes there were other market stalls selling mostly tourist items. After they stood side by side eating their burgers, he gained the last important fact. She didn't explain it right away, but eventually, she said she might have been stupid but she could not take any more tirades from her stepfather, describing him as a bully and how her mother was afraid of him.

'I've run away. I mean not for the first time – I done it a few times before – but they always got me back. This is as far as I ever come before.'

'How old are you?'

'Fourteen, nearly fifteen.'

He wiped his mouth with the paper napkin that had been wrapped around his burger. He was pleased with himself. He had been right: she was perfect. He was beginning to really like her, anticipating that

it could be a few weeks or even more, depending on how she turned out. He doubted that she had even been reported missing yet.

It took a little persuasion to get her to accept a room for the night, saying that it would just be until she made contact with her friend.

She looked dubious, chewing at her bitten nails again. Then she crumpled the ketchup-stained napkin into a ball and tossed it into the waste bin by the side of the stall.

'Are you sure? I don't know if I should.'

'I don't want you to think I'm coming on to you in any way, Heather. I just really need to get back as I have to do some studying and be up early in the morning. It's only a small box room, and you might have to use your sleeping bag, but you'll be safe until you decide what you're going to do next.'

'Do you live far away?'

'Two tube stops then a change and we're there.'

She smiled, hitched her canvas bag onto her shoulder as he picked up the strap wrapped around her sleeping bag. 'Are you coming?'

'This is really kind of you; I really appreciate it, thanks ever so much.'

They disappeared, heading towards Leicester Square tube station. Just another ordinary looking young couple stopping as he pointed out the hanging lanterns as they passed the entrance to China Town.

Nothing gave any hint of the horror that would come.

CHAPTER ONE

The entire team had been called together by DCI Ridley for a briefing in the boardroom of Kensington Police Station. Chairs had been placed around the large meeting table and along the walls in two tiers. Stacks of notebooks and pencils were placed in the centre of the table should they be required. Squashed in the corner was a trolley with tea and coffee.

The officers arrived in dribs and drabs; some dealt with crimes like assaults, robbery, burglary and fraud. Others were part of the safeguarding units, dealing with sexual offences, domestic abuse and offences against children. They helped themselves to refreshments then sat down at the table expectantly. Fourteen officers were already at the table by the time DC Laura Wade and DS Anik Joshi arrived, carrying their Starbucks coffees. Laura glanced at her watch. There was no sign of DS Jack Warr, and she suspected he would leave it to the last minute, so she placed her jacket on the seat next to her to reserve it. Anik eased the lid off his coffee, glanced towards the door and said under his breath, 'Jack's going to be late as usual. Any idea what the briefing's about?'

'No, I only got the e-mail last night. But whatever it is, it's got to be something big. I've never seen so many from other departments present in previous briefings.'

'Me too.'

The two chairs at the top of the table remained empty, as well as the one next to Laura. She glanced at her watch again. It was five to nine. Two female clerical staff hurried in. One squeezed past a seated officer and flicked a wall switch that lowered a large white screen at the far end of the boardroom. The other went to the top

end of the table and switched on a laptop that projected the Met Police crest onto the white screen. They then left the room.

At exactly one minute to nine, Jack – still wearing his overcoat – strode into the boardroom. He went straight to the refreshment trolley and poured himself a cup of tea, heaping in sugar before turning to look around the table. Laura raised her hand to indicate that she had saved the chair beside her, and he beamed. He had just sat down as Detective Chief Superintendent Ian Henderson walked in, giving a brief nod to everyone. He hesitated before he spoke.

‘Due to personal matters, which I can’t go into at present, DCI Simon Ridley, will be stepping down from his position here for some time. I will be introducing you to an officer whom I admire greatly that will be taking over from him. He will decide how all the cases you are involved in will be handled in DCI Ridley’s absence. As I said, I can’t give you any details regarding the situation, it must be treated with the utmost discretion and not revealed under any circumstances to anyone outside this station.’

Nobody knew quite how to interpret what Henderson had just said. There was a strong sense of confusion, but no one wanted to ask any questions. There was a light knock on the boardroom door and the Superintendent walked briskly over to open it. DCI Nathan Clarke was ushered into the room and stood next to Henderson.

‘This is Detective Chief Inspector Nathan Clarke. He has a full list of our ongoing cases for you to discuss with him. I apologise to everyone for having been unable to give any formal notice before this morning. It is imperative that we continue to practise the high standards and commitment the teams here have always had. Thank you, and I urge you to respect my request for the utmost privacy during this time.’

Henderson walked out leaving DCI Clarke facing everyone. If they had hoped to get some further insight into what had just occurred, they didn’t get it. Nathan Clarke opened a Word document on the

laptop, then, using a laser pointer, pointed towards the large screen at the end of the table.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, when I indicate your names on the screen, please could you give me an update regarding the investigation you are attached to.’

Clarke was tall and had a deep voice. He was dressed in an immaculate grey suit with a pristine white shirt, and tie. Everyone around the table craned their necks to look at the screen. They were still bemused at the morning’s development but followed Nathan Clarke’s request and waited in turn as he passed from name to name.

After an hour they were all released and returned to the incident room. It proved difficult for anyone to discuss the situation or ask questions regarding Ridley’s departure, as Nathan Clarke’s secretary was already moving his computer and other equipment into Ridley’s office. This was odd, as normally Ridley’s computer and laptop would have remained there and anyone taking over in his absence would simply use a log-in code to use them, but nobody paid particular attention. Nathan Clarke instructed her to remove various personal items belonging to Ridley, including a large pot plant and a box of framed pictures and commendations. The team were then each handed a typed single page giving them details of Clarke’s impressive career with the Met. It appeared he had been a serious high-flyer, excelling in IT and establishing a forward-thinking Guide to Digital Evidence program to help all Met officers to become computer literate. He had also led a team on an investigation into burner phones and mobiles to enhance tracking and arrests.

Lunch break was the first opportunity for the team to voice their concerns about what had taken place that morning. The consensus was that Ridley was ill, perhaps with some form of cancer, and had taken time out to have chemo. Amid all the frantic speculation, Jack kept his thoughts to himself, but inside he was upset and angry. Surely he had been a close enough friend for Ridley to have had a

private conversation with him about what was going on. Unlike the rest of the team, Jack had been privy to Ridley's cancer diagnosis the previous year, but he had been assured that he was in the clear, in complete remission. He had already been absent for two weeks prior to this morning, telling Jack he was taking a well-earned break. What the hell was going on? Thankfully, Jack was able to avoid getting involved in any discussions with his colleagues, as Clarke was already arranging one-on-one meetings with everyone.

Jack's own meeting with him was quite lengthy. He had been overseeing the investigation of a violent knife attack at a local corner shop and officers had made an arrest the day before. Jack would have to go through a lengthy court process as the suspect, Rodney Middleton, had a long history of violence and had been refused bail. Clarke listened attentively as Jack outlined the entire investigation which resulted in officers tracking down the offender to his flat. Clarke looked over the statements and suggested that Jack delve further into the medical background of the assailant. From his previous record it had been suggested Middleton was a schizophrenic and he had been transferred to a psychiatric unit for assessment. He told Jack the CPS would want a full medical history, and it was best to get a warrant issued.

Jack had actually already arranged a meeting with a psychiatrist from the unit but told Clarke that in his opinion Middleton had 'acted up' after his previous arrest eighteen months earlier, to get a lenient sentence, serving only seven months before his release. He didn't mention that it was Ridley who had first suggested that there was something fishy going on.

'Jack, I'm not interested in your opinion. Please just get the necessary medical data as it appears his violence is escalating. I also suggest you re-interview his girlfriend.'

Jack had already arranged to bring in the girlfriend for further questioning, but he simply agreed with Clarke as he was eager to

leave. Jack had not actually met the offender as the original DS who had been dealing with the case had gone on long-term sick leave. A forensic psychologist had been contacted to assess the defendant and judge whether he was fit to enter a plea, stand trial and participate in proceedings. It felt as if Clarke was being over-diligent, but he presumed it was due to the fact that he was taking over from Ridley at short notice. When Jack returned to the incident room, he found that most of the others felt as if they had been interrogated rather than asked for a summary of the cases to which they had been assigned.

When he left at five thirty, Jack and the entire team had no clearer understanding of what was going on with Ridley. Maggie arrived home shortly after Jack and, as soon as she saw him, she knew something was wrong. He was in the kitchen putting a casserole into the oven, and their daughter, Hannah, was upstairs being given a bath by Jack's mother, Penny.

'What's up?'

'How do you know something's up?'

'Well, you don't usually hover in the kitchen with a glass of whisky before six thirty. Did you have a bad day?'

'Not exactly. Something strange happened and none of us can fathom what's going on. Ridley's been replaced, with no reason given. So, we have a new DCI who's being very over-cautious with everything we're working on. Most of the team assume Ridley must be ill. You know he had that cancer diagnosis, and when I found out he was having chemo he made me promise to keep my mouth shut about it. He also told me he'd been given the all-clear and, to be honest, I believed him. He's been in great spirits lately, almost unlike him, telling me he'd started working out at a gym and asking my opinion about these new clothes he'd bought. I was surprised when he took off for a couple of weeks. I even thought he might have been lying about being given the all-clear but didn't want anyone to know. He didn't look that good either.'

‘Why don’t you call him?’

‘I did. No reply. It went straight to voicemail.’

‘Well, I’m sure he’ll be in touch.’

‘I guess so. I’ve become quite fond of the old codger . . . even more so with him testing out his new wardrobe on me, but this is so unlike him . . . it was just sprung on everyone.’

‘What veg do you want?’

‘What?’

‘With the casserole. We have spinach or carrots.’

‘Whatever . . . I’ll go up and see Mum and Hannah.’

Maggie caught his arm. ‘Before you do, can I have a quick word? Something’s bothering me a bit. Does Penny seem alright to you?’

Jack shrugged, watching as Maggie took her coat off and handed it to him.

‘I’ve been meaning to have a chat with you because I’m concerned. Penny seems to be a bit forgetful lately and I wondered, you know, if it’s too much for her?’

‘If what’s too much?’

‘Well, she has to take Hannah to nursery every morning, then collect her in the afternoon. She’s only there for three hours before Penny walks her to the playground, then comes back home, feeds her, bathes her, gets her ready for bed. It’s a lot for a woman in her seventies, you know.’

‘She’s fine; she loves it . . . and I haven’t noticed anything.’

‘OK, well I just wanted to mention it. If you could hang my coat up in the hall, I’ll get on with setting the table.’

‘I could just call round to speak to him, couldn’t I?’

‘Yes, you could.’

‘Although the Super asked for complete privacy. What do you think?’

‘Jack, it’s up to you. Did you turn the oven on?’

‘Oh, I might not have. I’ll call him again and leave a message.’ Jack walked out of the kitchen to hang up her coat.

Maggie shook her head and went over to turn the oven on. She then opened the fridge and took out the vegetables.

Although she had treated it lightly with Jack, she was genuinely concerned about Penny. She had noticed a few things that were unlike her: she had left the iron on a couple of times recently, and the washing machine was full of dirty clothes that hadn’t been washed. They weren’t terribly serious things, but they were niggling at Maggie. Also, the nursery had given Penny some dates for parent meetings and Maggie had found them left on the hall table under a duster.

When Jack went into Hannah’s bedroom, she was wrapped in a soft bath towel, and his mother was opening a drawer to get out a nightdress for her. Jack gave Hannah a hug and a kiss, and then sat on the edge of her little bed with one of her cuddly toys.

‘Has she been a good girl today, Mum?’

‘Yes, apart from eating another little boy’s biscuit, according to the new young nursery assistant.’

Jack watched as Penny put on Hannah’s nightdress and some soft wool socks, saying that the nights were getting colder so if she tossed her blankets off at least her feet would stay warm. Hannah took the cuddly toy from Jack, saying ‘dadda’. Penny then picked her up and Jack got off the bed so that Penny could tuck her in and pull up the sides. She was too big for a cot now, but still needed the sense of safety.

‘The casserole’s in the oven. Are you having dinner with us tonight?’ Jack asked.

‘No, dear, I’m going to have an early night. After I drop Hannah off at nursery tomorrow, I’m going to meet up with some friends. We’re arranging a bingo night so when I get the dates, I’ll tell Maggie, as one of you will need to be here for Hannah.’

‘That’s good that you’re making new friends,’ Jack smiled. ‘I sometimes worry about you leaving all your old friends back in Devon. It’s about time you had some new interests.’

‘Well, I don’t know if you could call bingo a new interest! But we’ll have dinner and make it a weekly date . . . if I enjoy it. A couple of the women are bringing their husbands, and then there’s the caretaker from the nursery . . . he’s up for a night out.’

‘That’s great, Mum! Just let us know when one of us needs to be here to look after Hannah.’

Penny pulled out a large story book and drew up a low chair to sit beside Hannah’s bed. She lowered the brightness of the bedside lamp and glanced at Jack as he hovered.

‘Everything alright, dear?’

‘Yeah, yeah. See you in the morning, unless you want me to bring a tray of supper up to your room?’

‘No, thank you, dear, but I appreciate the offer. You enjoy having dinner with Maggie.’

Jack quietly closed the door behind him as Penny began reading a story to Hannah. He went into his home office to call Ridley. It went straight to voicemail again, so he left a message asking if he could do anything and hoping that Ridley would get in touch with him. By the time he went back to the kitchen, Maggie had cooked the vegetables and was just taking the casserole out of the oven. Jack opened a bottle of red wine and fetched two glasses.

‘Mum seems better than ever. She’s joining some women to start going to bingo once a week.’

‘You didn’t mention anything to her?’

‘No, like I said, she seemed fine. I left her reading Hannah a bedtime story.’

‘I should have gone up to kiss Hannah goodnight,’ Maggie frowned. ‘Never mind, it’s nice to have a quiet evening together and I’m feeling really pooped. We had a long day today, lots of

new cancer cases taking up beds, and as usual we're awfully short-staffed.'

Jack nodded. 'I called Ridley again and left another message. It's all very odd.'

'Maybe he *is* ill again, and just wants his privacy?' Maggie suggested. 'You could always go round to his place and find out; although if he wants you, or anyone else, to know I'm sure he'll contact you.'

'Yeah, you're probably right . . . perhaps I'll pay him a visit at the weekend.'

Jack ate hungrily, and they drank almost an entire bottle of wine between them, before Maggie, her eyes drooping from tiredness, said she was going to have a shower and go to bed. Jack said he would clear up and then join her. He loaded the plates and cutlery into the dishwasher, washed up the casserole dish, wiped the work surfaces, then filled his glass with the last of the wine before switching off the lights and going upstairs to his office.

Opening his briefcase, Jack took out his notes on the investigation and listed his meetings for the following day. First thing he had the appointment with the psychiatrist, to discuss Rodney Middleton's previous medical history. He knew he would be given the usual blather about client confidentiality but was hoping that as Middleton was no longer a patient, he might actually be able to glean some information. He had checked, as Clarke had suggested getting a warrant, but had been informed he did not need one as Middleton had signed a statement saying police could access his medical records. This was unusual and made Jack feel as if Middleton might be adept at playing the system. Jack had also arranged an interview with Amanda Dunn, Middleton's girlfriend, at her hostel in Shepherd's Bush. Middleton's lawyer had informed Jack that she had moved out of the flat they had previously shared.

By the time Jack had showered, Maggie was fast asleep in bed. He tried not to wake her as he climbed in beside her. More often than

not she slept so soundly that he joked it would take a bomb blast to wake her. He switched off the bedside light and lay down with his back to her. Just as he was dozing off, he heard low murmurs from Penny's bedroom above. He turned over, suspecting that she had probably left her TV on and fallen asleep. He lay on his back, eyes wide open, as the murmur continued, then got up with a sigh of irritation and crept up the stairs to Penny's bedroom, standing outside and listening. It wasn't the television. Penny was having a lengthy conversation with someone on the phone. Jack knew his mother had a mobile; in fact, he had insisted on buying her one in case of an emergency when she was out, but he had never heard or seen her using it. Jack paid the bills, so he knew that she very rarely, if ever, made calls. He heard her laughing, then felt as if he was spying on her, and quickly headed back down to his bedroom.

Jack slid into bed and lay back trying to listen but there was no more murmuring so he assumed she must have ended her call. He thought about what Maggie had said and knew that his mum's forgetfulness was a bit of a concern. However, Maggie had insinuated that Penny might have signs of dementia, in addition to the normal symptoms of old age. Jack felt that Maggie was probably being over-pessimistic as she had been dealing with a number of very elderly patients during the pandemic, many of whom did have dementia.

* * *

The following morning Jack overslept. Maggie was already serving breakfast to Penny and Hannah by the time he had got dressed and shaved. Jack sat at the kitchen table, buttered some toast and poured himself a coffee, whilst Maggie gave him a kiss on the cheek before rushing out.

Penny cleared the breakfast away and prepared Hannah's orange juice and cookies for her mid-morning break. Jack gave Hannah a

bite of his toast whilst she sat in her highchair, noticing that it was getting way too small for her. She had also learnt how to lift the tray and slide out on her own.

‘I heard you talking on the phone last night?’ Jack said tentatively.

Penny closed the dishwasher and began wiping down the work surfaces, whilst Hannah chortled and kicked out happily.

Jack continued: ‘I thought it was your TV, and that maybe you had forgotten to turn it off.’

‘Oh yes. I was talking to my new friend about the bingo dinner. You know you shouldn’t give her that seeded toast. It often gets stuck in her throat because she doesn’t chew it properly. Here, let me get her out of there as we should be leaving in a minute.’

Jack finished his coffee and by the time he had put his dirty things into the dishwasher, Penny had got Hannah into her buggy in the hallway.

‘Right, we’re off. Have a good day, dear.’ She leant in through the doorway and waved, and Jack blew a kiss to his daughter. He smiled to see her making the same gesture back to him, replete with kissing noises.

Jack collected his briefcase from the office, got his coat and went into the kitchen to double check that everything was turned off. He noticed that Penny had forgotten to take Hannah’s orange juice and biscuits, which were still on the kitchen table in a zip-up food bag with her name printed in cartoon letters on the outside, and decided he would drop it off on his way to interview the psychiatrist.

Ten minutes later, Jack pulled up outside the gates of the nursery school, which were kept locked whilst the children were inside. He rang the bell and waited, putting his mask on. After a few minutes a pretty teenager came out and he was able to pass the bag through the railings to her. ‘My mother forgot to bring this, for Hannah Warr.’

‘Oh thanks, I’ll take it in. I’m Carol, one of the classroom assistants,’ she smiled, before walking back into the nursery. He checked

his watch, realising that he had not seen Penny returning home before he left, but then told himself that she was probably doing some shopping before she met up with her friends.

By the time he had found a parking space near the psychiatric practice, just off Marylebone High Street, he was fifteen minutes late.

Angus Seymour's name was listed on the brass plaque outside the building. Jack walked into the small reception area. There was a rather elderly woman sitting behind a curved desk who looked up as he approached. She was wearing a mask and Jack quickly pulled his own mask up, as it was hanging from his right ear.

'I have an appointment with Dr Seymour.'

The receptionist put on her glasses and opened the appointment book.

'I am Detective Sergeant Jack Warr, Met Police.'

She pointedly looked at her watch.

'Sorry I'm a bit late . . . traffic.'

'Let me call through to him. He does have a rather a full morning.'

Jack waited patiently as she spoke to Seymour briefly then told Jack that he could go straight up the stairs to the second landing where Mr Seymour's office was behind the first door to his right.

The carpet was well worn, even though the clinic was in quite a prestigious location. Jack knocked on the door, which had Angus Seymour's name printed in gold on the outside.

The first room had three hard-back chairs and was obviously a waiting area, and then there was a door to another room which was ajar. Jack hovered for a moment before he heard an abrupt voice asking him to come in.

Seymour was about the same age as Jack, wearing casual jeans, a checked shirt and a thick tie pulled down to the third button of his shirt.

'Sit down and let's get on with it,' Seymour said briskly. 'I have a patient in fifteen minutes. You can remove your mask.'

Jack lowered his mask and sat down on a chair opposite Seymour. Positioned against a wall was a worn leather couch with stacks of files on the seats, so he doubted it was used in a Freudian capacity. The walls had numerous framed diplomas and a couple of Turner prints. The modern desk had a laptop, telephone and an anglepoise lamp. Seymour sat in a leather swivel chair and flipped open a large diary.

‘I would like some information regarding a previous patient of yours by the name of Rodney Middleton,’ Jack began. ‘As he is no longer a patient, I am hoping you’ll be able to assist me without worrying about client confidentiality.’

‘Yes, I am aware of the reason you’re here, Detective Sergeant,’ Seymour replied. ‘However, it would be unethical for me to discuss any patient with you, past or present. At my suggestion, Rodney Middleton was transferred to another practitioner; being only seventeen, he came under the umbrella of Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services.’

Jack was feeling frustrated. ‘But it would not be unethical if you were just to tell me how you came to see him.’

Seymour flipped back some pages in his diary, then took his time before he sighed.

‘He was referred to CAMHS by his GP, and they contacted me to do an assessment. He was with me for six months, having one session every two weeks.’

‘Why did you refer him to another practice?’

‘I suppose I can tell you that. I had grave concerns regarding his aggressive behaviour and his inappropriate interactions, not only with myself but with my staff. My receptionist in particular.’

‘So, you felt you couldn’t help him?’

Seymour nodded, then closed his notebook. ‘I suggested that perhaps past-life regression, a form of hypnosis, might help. He was refusing to take his medication, was becoming very aggressive and had missed several appointments. He would not accept that he

had severe mental health issues, and I was concerned – not only for his wellbeing but for anyone associated with him.’

‘Was he schizophrenic?’

‘Not to my mind. Though I considered a multiple personality disorder, and decided that he needed treatment. Do you have the details of the clinic I referred him to, as they would obviously be better equipped to discuss his condition?’

‘Yes, but his current therapist is on holiday so I’ll have to wait a couple of weeks. You said his GP referred him to you?’

‘Yes, that is correct, via CAMHS. They contacted me as it was suggested that Rodney needed further psychiatric assessment after he was released. His GP also knew about the fire at his family home.’

Jack was also aware of the incident. ‘Was he suspected of setting the blaze?’

‘I believe so. He was only sixteen or seventeen. He had an abusive father and his mother was a drug addict. As a teenage boy it was clear that he needed help to recover from the tragedy.’

‘Can you tell me more about it?’

Seymour sighed and glanced at his watch.

‘I can only tell you that his young siblings died in the blaze. There was an extensive investigation. However, I’m sure this will all be on his record.’

‘Well, I’ve read the case file and the SIO was of the opinion that Rodney could have been involved.’

‘I believe that was never proved, but after it happened, he became very troubled and then began to get into trouble with the police.’

Jack made a few notes, and it was obvious that Seymour was eager for the meeting to end.

‘So, Rodney was what age when you first met him?’

‘Eighteen. Once he became an adult, and no longer under CAMHS, I didn’t have any further contact with his doctor or the

psychiatrist who took over his treatment. I'm afraid I'll have to finish now, detective, as I have a patient waiting.'

Jack stood up, pleased that Seymour had in fact given him more information than he had expected. Seymour scribbled on a Post-it note and handed it to him.

'That's where Rodney was referred after being here with me. There may be someone else that can see you rather than having to wait.'

Jack put the Post-it into his briefcase and headed for the door. Seymour pushed back his chair and stood up.

'Is he suspected of something serious?'

'Yes. Another violent assault.'

Seymour put his hands in his trouser pockets. 'On a young girl?'

Jack shook his head. He was slightly taken aback when Seymour moved from behind his desk to open the door for him.

'I would certainly be worried about any woman getting close to Middleton, especially very young females and by that, I mean underage girls. There was a lot of press coverage . . . ' He added.

Jack thanked him for his time. As he passed through the small reception area, he saw a young woman was sitting waiting, wearing a felt hat pulled down to hide her face.

Jack smiled at the receptionist and walked towards her. From Seymour's last comment about the press coverage, Jack thought that he had been hinting he should look through old newspaper archives. He would ask Laura to check through the case file on Holmes.

The receptionist gave him a small nod as he stopped in front of her. He spoke quietly.

'Do you recall a previous patient named Rodney Middleton?'

The receptionist pushed her glasses further up her nose and shrugged.

'I most certainly do, but I am obviously not allowed to discuss patients, past or present.'

‘He apparently caused some trouble with the staff a number of years ago. If there is anything you could tell me, I would be most grateful.’

She sighed. ‘He was a very troubled soul. But his aggressive attitude towards me, and another secretary who works here, was very unpleasant. That is all I am prepared to tell you.’

Jack didn’t waste any more time and left to drive to interview Middleton’s girlfriend in Hammersmith. On his way there he rang the station to ask Laura if she could search newspaper articles about Rodney Middleton and the house fire from about six years ago. He was certain there would have been a lot of coverage saved in the case file. Laura was a bit tetchy and said she had her own work cut out for her with the new DCI always being in the incident room.

‘Well, if you can help, I’d be really grateful,’ Jack said. ‘And perhaps you could make a note on the incident board that I’ll probably be out until after lunch as I’m on my way to West London. I’ve just left Marylebone and the traffic’s a nightmare.’

Laura promised to help if she could.

Jack dug out Middleton’s girlfriend’s address in Shepherd’s Bush. The girl had previously been questioned by uniforms as she had been at Middleton’s flat when he was arrested.

After finding a parking space and leaving the Met Police vehicle log book on the dashboard, he approached the large semi-detached house. There was a discreet notice by the front door with the name of the hostel’s caretaker and stating that privacy was essential. All callers had to ring a bell as the main front door was kept locked.

Jack waited several minutes before he heard an inner door opening. The main front door was eventually unlocked and opened by a woman wearing navy blue overalls and trainers.

Jack introduced himself and showed his ID before the woman removed the chain lock and stepped back for him to enter, then replaced the chain lock before ushering him into a reception area.

This was dominated by a large table covered with leaflets and self-help guides. On every wall were Social Services posters, details of various self-help programs, and a list of instructions for the residents. The rules were underlined in red: no visitors, no late entry, no food in bedrooms, and all residents had to sign in and out.

The woman introduced herself as Mavis Thornton, explaining that she was the hostel's official caretaker. She made it very clear that it was a Christian charitable foundation, with special care assistants and medical attendance when necessary. Amanda was in the day care unit and she said that she would call her out. If they needed privacy she would see if there was an interview room available.

Jack waited in the reception area for over ten minutes, glancing through the various leaflets and details about local churches and services.

Miss Thornton eventually returned and said that Amanda had gone into the interview room, then asked if he would like a coffee or tea. Jack said he would love a cup of tea, and Miss Thornton showed him the way past a wide staircase into a corridor with various doors leading off it. The interview room was the second door to the right. She slid across an IN USE plaque attached to the door and gestured for him to go in, saying that she would bring his tea shortly.

Jack gave a polite knock before he opened the door and entered the small room. It had two chairs and a table, with children's toys in a wicker basket and a bookshelf with some paperback books by the window.

Amanda was sitting with her back to the door and turned nervously as Jack entered. She was very petite, wearing a floral dress, trainers and a pink cardigan. Her long blonde hair was held back in a braid, with a heavy fringe that almost hid her eyes, but did not disguise the deep rings beneath them.

'Hi, Amanda, I'm DS Jack Warr.'

‘Yes . . . ’ Her hands were clasped in her lap.

‘Thank you for agreeing to talk to me.’ Jack pulled out the chair to sit opposite her and opened his notebook. He searched his pockets for a pen and had to rifle through his briefcase before he found one.

‘How long have you been here, Amanda? I hope you don’t mind me calling you by your Christian name?’

‘No.’

‘So, when did you come to stay here?’

‘Three weeks ago.’

‘Has your boyfriend, Rodney Middleton, been in contact with you since you came here?’

‘No, visitors aren’t allowed, and I don’t want to see him again.’

‘Can you tell me about the night you called the police?’

Amanda began to chew at her nails, and it was a while before she eventually explained that she had become afraid of Rodney. He had made threats because she had told him she wanted to leave him, and he had got very angry. The landlady had heard him shouting so she had come to the door and Rodney had spoken to her and apologised.

‘But as soon as she left, he punched me in the face. When I fell down, he started kicking me. I began screaming so he walked out.’

‘So what did you do then?’

‘I thought he’d do something bad, so I rang the police. He came back and started punching me again. I ran out of the room and tried to get out of the front door, but he chased after me, and kicked me until I was on the ground. He knocked me against a wall outside, and that was when the police arrived.’

‘Was he charged with assault?’

‘No, I was on me feet when they came, so I never bothered.’

‘You have called the police numerous times in the past, haven’t you?’

‘Yes.’

'I believe you've suffered abuse from Mr Middleton on four different occasions, and one time you were hospitalised. But you never pressed any charges against him. Why did you stay with him, Amanda?'

Amanda shrugged and continued to chew at her nails.

'You know, Amanda, your evidence will help to get him a lengthy sentence and he is in custody so cannot assault you. Did he threaten you?'

'Yes, he said he'd kill me if I caused him trouble. So I did nothing because I was afraid I would be sent back to my parents. I was a runaway; Rodney took me in and cared for me when I was in a really bad way. My father was abusive, and I met Rodney at Euston Station after I escaped from my parents. I was so scared when I arrived in London. He came up to me at the station. He was really nice and bought me a burger and chips, and then when he found out I had no place to stay he took me in.'

'When was this?'

'Four years ago.'

'How old were you then?'

'Twelve. I'm seventeen now.'

Jack was shocked at her age, and jotted a note to track her details with mispers. 'So, whilst you were living with Rodney, did you work?'

'No, just kept the flat nice and cooked for him.'

'What work was Rodney doing to pay for rent and food?'

'He was on benefits and never had a job. He was mostly at home, watching TV and playing computer games.'

'With you?'

'Yes.'

'Did you have any visitors?'

'No, Social Services came to see him once, but I hid in the bedroom.'

‘So no one came from his family?’

‘No, his mother died a while back and his father is in prison.’

‘Was Rodney kind to you?’

‘Yes, mostly, but he would just sometimes have these rages and then he was nasty.’

‘Did he ever discuss his past with you?’

‘Not really. He didn’t like to talk about what had happened. I knew it was something bad as he had nightmares and would scream about being in a fire.’

‘Did you know he had two young sisters that died in the fire?’

‘No, he never said nothing about them. He had a few photographs but if I asked about who they were he would get angry, so I just left it. It was better to have him calm and being nice than have him get angry. Anyway, he took them and hid them somewhere, so I never saw the photographs again.’

Jack took notes as Amanda spoke with barely any emotion in her voice. He closed his notebook.

‘Have you been told about the trial? As a result of you contacting the police, Rodney was arrested for a violent assault on the owner of a grocery store, who recognised him and knew where he lived.’

Amanda shrugged and continued biting her nails. ‘Stupid, he done that before, got arrested for it.’

‘Did you have a sexual relationship with Rodney?’

For the first time she showed some emotion, cringing back in her chair.

‘I’m sorry to have to ask you these personal questions, Amanda, but you were underage when you first met Rodney.’

‘Yes, we had sex, but not recently.’

‘Did Rodney ever bring back other young girls when you were there?’

She nodded, shifting her weight in the chair.

‘Sometimes, but they never stayed for long. He picked them up at the station, like he did with me. They were young girls and he wanted them to stay, but I didn’t like it; that was often why we had fights.’

‘When you were left alone in the flat, did you ever think of leaving?’

‘I couldn’t.’

‘Why was that?’

‘Rodney said I’d be arrested for running away so he locked me in, for safety. I started to complain about it and that’s when the beatings started. He would tie me up so I couldn’t leave when he wasn’t there.’

‘How long did this go on for?’

‘What?’

‘You being tied up and locked in?’

‘Oh, it was ages, maybe six months or so the last time. I can’t really remember it clearly cos he would give me some of his medication to make me sleep. He blames me for his arrest, but I didn’t know that, before he started punching me, he had attacked that poor man in the local grocery shop. Like I just said, he was getting out of control with his violence to me.’

Jack was struggling to take it all in. Amanda remained completely unemotional whilst describing her trauma, while Jack was more and more shocked by her revelations. He decided that he had enough to make out a report and voice his concerns about Amanda’s welfare, which would then involve Social Services and a safeguarding team. He thanked her for her time and left the room.

Miss Thornton was at the end of the corridor, and he signalled to her that his meeting was over. She hurried down to the room and fetched Amanda out, putting her arm around her as she ushered her past Jack and back down the corridor towards the day unit.

Jack waited until Miss Thornton reappeared. ‘Is Amanda receiving therapy, or is anyone else interviewing her?’ he asked.

‘Well, obviously she was interviewed at length before being brought here. I’ve not been given details regarding any therapy. She obviously has a low IQ and is subdued. She’s as helpful as she can be when working in the kitchens. We’re attempting to trace her family as this isn’t a long-stay establishment.’

‘You know she was a runaway?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, we do have that information from Liverpool. She is also illiterate and obviously she may be required to be a witness at his trial. A police officer interviewed her but, as you may have discovered, she’s not very forthcoming. We’ve been told to wait for further instructions; in the meantime, we’ll take good care of her, and hope we can trace her family.’

‘Thank you for your time. I’ll be in touch if I need to talk to Amanda again.’

Jack turned to leave but Miss Thornton put a hand on his arm.

‘She is a very troubled soul.’

It was the second time that morning he had heard that expression. The same phrase had been used about Rodney.