

# HACKNEY CENTRAL

by

MICHAEL K. FOSTER

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**Novellas**

*DCI Jack Mason in the early years*

HACKNEY CENTRAL



Michael K. Foster

# CHAPTER ONE

*London's East End - 1993*

He did not know any of them, but he knew their smell: cannabis, trouble, and arrogance. Ignoring the unmistakable “herbal” whiff, Detective Sergeant Jack Mason stepped into the steel sarcophagus, pressed the ground-floor button, and waited for the lift doors to close. Ten floors up on the Clapton Park Estate was not the safest environment to be in, not at any time. These thugs did not have a conscience, but they certainly had balls. Either way, this was his domain, and he was determined to make his presence felt.

As he weighed up his options, there was something unnerving about his fellow passengers, as if they knew who had turned Harold Watkins’ flat over. Left for dead on his living room floor, the level of violence used was deplorable and needless.

As the lift began its descent, Mason could hear the machinery creaking and the cables whipping in the shaft. Above the door, hidden amongst the graffiti, he noticed a green digital display counting down the floor levels. Fast descents spooked Mason. It felt unnatural, as though he was plummeting to earth and certain death.

‘You people from around here?’ the sergeant asked, knowing full-well they were not.

‘What’s it to you, motherfucker?’

He was seventeen, no more. Still capable.

Clearly the ringleader, the sergeant sized him up. He wore a crew-neck T-shirt tight across the chest, blue jeans, and a pair of white Reebok trainers, loosely laced. Mason had seen his like too many times over the years. Gangs were part of the inner-city fabric these days, and few neighbourhoods were crime-free. Many observers maintained that poverty, sub-standard housing, and unemployment caused the problem, but there was a lot more to it. Gangs were sophisticated organisations, built on loyalty, trust, and the basic need of feeling wanted. Where society had failed miserably to provide facilities in which young people could attach themselves, gang master's had given them hope.

The sergeant's stare hardened.

'Not seen you people around here before.'

'So what?' a youth with short-cropped hair replied.

'And you are?' Mason asked.

'Keep your nose out, or else.'

Tension hung in the air.

Mason moved from the back of the lift towards the door. A precautionary measure, he wasn't giving in to bullying tactics. Not now. Not at any time. Show signs of weakness, and these scoundrels would beat him to within an inch of his life. Supremacy governed here. Gang leaders ruled with an iron fist, and residents feared for their lives and were too frightened to speak out. Even the police patrolled in numbers. Never alone. The trouble was that gangs who formed alliances with one another only brought more misery to the streets. It was a never-ending cycle, and no one could put a stop to it.

Not until now, that is.

The moment he felt the floor shake under his feet and the doors opening, the sergeant made his move. He was quick, too quick, and as he stepped out of the lift, he turned sharply to confront them.

‘Where do you lot live?’ he demanded.

Confused at first, the ringleader slid his hand inside his pocket, trying to conceal the motion. Mason knew what he had hidden there and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. In the last two months, local gangs had been responsible for two homicides, contributing to the area’s reputation for knife crime. GBH was commonplace, and police recently jailed nine local gang members for violent street robbery.

He heard the menacing click of a knife blade opening and froze.

‘I warned you to keep your fucking nose out of it,’ the ringleader snarled.

‘Don’t make this hard for yourself.’

‘Oh yeah? And who’s gonna come to your rescue now?’

‘Give him it, Tony!’ another yelled out.

As the knot in his stomach tightened, the sergeant clenched his fists in readiness. In what was a well-rehearsed routine, the six troublemakers now circled him. He had been here before, many times, and knew what damage these individuals could inflict on a person.

Six against one were unfavorable odds, but he’d already decided. He would take the ringleader out—a size nine boot to the crotch.

Right on cue, a marked Ford Sierra GLS appeared out of nowhere. Barely fifty metres away, the officers speeding to his help had shifted the odds rapidly in his favour. As the patrol

car skidded to a halt, the thugs took off into the concrete jungle, and the air felt much sweeter suddenly.

‘You all right?’ the young constable called out as he slid from the vehicle and ran to Mason’s help.

‘I’m fine,’ he replied, holding up his warrant card. ‘Who are they?’

‘Never seen them before, Sarge. Do you want me to follow them?’

‘No. They’re probably miles away by now.’

The constable shrugged, awaiting orders.

Mason thanked them and pocketed his warrant card. Too late now, he thought, he would deal with it later. Whoever the ringleader was, he now had a name. It wasn’t much, but enough. These scoundrels would not be too difficult to find; it was just a matter of legwork.

He glanced at the marked police car as it slid from the estate, then up at the tower block again. With any luck, the police surgeon, Dr White, along with the Scenes of Crime Officers, would report their findings before long.

Not the best start to his day. Mason thought. An old man lay dying in a hospital bed, and someone had ransacked his flat. Whoever handled such a heinous crime would need to be brought to justice.

# CHAPTER TWO

It was late afternoon when Jack Mason finally arrived back at Hackney Central Police Station, a red brick construction on Lower Clapton Road in the heart of London's East End. Recently promoted to the Metropolitan's Serious Crime Squad, Mason was loving every minute. *Detective Sergeant!* His wife, Brenda, had shrieked the moment he broke the news to her. She was so proud of him, so excited, and he had always dreamed of heading up his own investigation team. Now one step closer, he was out to impress.

The office was open plan, high-ceilinged, with canted bay windows overlooking Clapton Square and the busy A107. Compared to other divisions in the capital, there was always plenty to do here. The Borough of Hackney had a vast catchment area, and its crime rate was higher than the norm. The sergeant felt at home here and worked with a great bunch of like-minded officers who were eager to get things done.

It was four o'clock, and with a firmer grip on the case files, his determination to expose Tony intensified. But not today. Mason had promised Brenda a lavish birthday dinner, and his genuine excitement was palpable.

As he stared at the mountain of paperwork covering his desk, he groaned. Forms were the bane of every police officer's life, and they were spreading like the bubonic plague. Nowadays, they place too much emphasis on accountability and channel too little energy into fighting crime. Frustration

simmered, and something had to break.

Ignoring the steady stream of incoming calls, Mason finished his incident report and checked his in-tray. The only positive news he could offer was that forensics had finally finished their investigations into Harold Watkins' flat. It wasn't much, but it was a start. Still unable to interview the old man, the team had to work blind. Not the best approach to solving a crime, but there was not a lot they could do about it.

The sergeant sat for a moment and tried to get his head around it all. Still shaken by the Clapton Park knife attack, he was craving a muted moment alone. He'd been lucky, of course, and had gotten off lightly, considering. Most crimes followed a distinct pattern, but Mason was in a quandary. Was this a planned attack or the work of an opportunist?

He caught his companion's eye. 'Any feedback from our door-to-door enquiries?'

Norwell Summers, a thirty-four-year-old detective, lifted his head above the divider screen and smiled. He had a casual, unruffled approach which Mason always found reassuring.

'Nothing yet, Sarge.'

'What about uniforms? Any more reports of local troublemakers on the Clapton Park Estate?'

'No. Nothing of interest has shown up.'

Mason shuffled awkwardly. 'That's odd. I could have sworn someone would have seen or heard something, especially the amount of damage that was done to the flat.'

Norwell frowned and said, 'People are too afraid to speak out, and who can blame them?'

Mason grunted his agreement. This was a nasty attack, but it wasn't the first time it had happened on the estate. There

were others. Then again, it was always difficult to carry out a stop and search operation, never mind the dangers involved.

The sergeant looked at his watch.

‘What about local gang fights? Anything in the overnights?’

‘There was a dustup over at the Prince of Wales yesterday evening, which spilled out into Millfields Park.’ Summers handed him a printout of the incident report. ‘Two gangs fighting over territorial rights.’

‘Drugs, no doubt?’

‘Difficult to say. According to the duty officers present, there were three arrests for disturbance of the peace, two broken windows, and a few cuts and bruises. Other than that, no one was seriously injured.’

Mason remained unfazed as the detective constable laid out the facts. Street gangs often covered a few blocks of an estate, while higher-level criminal factions controlled large swathes of it. This was the method for territorial division and control. The danger arose when one gang forged an alliance with another. As the organization grew, its disputes escalated into violent street wars. It was all about domination, and ever since introducing crack cocaine onto the estate, new territories were being fought over. It was a vicious cycle, and one that proved hard to stop.

The sergeant cocked his head to one side. ‘This recent spate of attacks on old people’s flats sounds as if someone is trying to escalate up the criminal ladder.’

‘Could be. But why pick on defenceless pensioners?’

‘Vulnerable targets, I guess?’

‘Possible, but highly unlikely, don’t you think?’

‘I’m not convinced. The problem is that high-level drug dealers usually control large swathes of the city using enforcers. These people make money under protecting their suppliers.’

Summer’s crinkled his brow. ‘The question is, who is running the estate?’

‘That’s a brilliant question.’

‘Do you think someone deliberately targeted Harold Watkins’ property?’

‘I’m told it was a group of youths who turned his flat over. This was about inflicting fear onto the estate—an attempt to keep a tight lid on things.’

Summers rocked back in his seat. ‘I wonder if someone is using young hooligans as a cover-up for their own activities?’

‘Anything is possible. The problem with that is there is little in the way of fingerprints, no eyewitness accounts, and nobody will talk.’

Summers conceded with a shrug.

‘You may have a point, Sarge. But my money is on a local gang being involved.’

Mason cut Summers short by raising his hand. ‘You know what a group of teenagers are like once they are let loose on a property. They egg each other on, cause unnecessary willful damage, and always stamp their mark on it. Also, there was no graffiti left on the walls, which you’d expect to find from a group of seasoned thugs.’

The constable’s frown lines tightened again. ‘Someone had it in for the old man, that is for sure.’

Summers had a point, and a good one at that. Whoever had threatened him at knifepoint had rattled his cage. He would

need to find out who Tony was, establish what he and his band of cronies were up to around the time the Watkin's attack took place. Could they be part of a distraction tactic, as Summers was suggesting, or just a group of local scrotes intent on causing trouble?

The man leading the investigation approached from a side room.

'What's the latest on the Harold Watkins break in?' DCI Cummins asked.

'He's still in intensive care,' Mason replied dutifully.

'We need to get a statement from him, the sooner the better in this case.'

'I'll call by at the hospital in the morning, boss.'

'Good man. Let's hope he's made a full recovery by then and can give us a few answers.'

Bob Cummins was old school. With retirement in sight, his thirty-five years with the Metropolitan Police were ending. Known throughout the station as Boss, Mason had warmed to the title. It had a nice ring to it, not overly condescending compared to sir! Cummins was a down-to-earth police officer and wasn't pretentious like some of the other senior officers he knew. He was astute, unwavering, and eager to share a lifetime's knowledge with anyone willing to listen. Deep down he reminded him of Ralph Curtis, an old family friend and retired police officer who had taken him under his wing after his father had left home. Mason vowed that if he ever reached the prestigious rank of DCI, he would follow his example.

Cummins shook his head in despair. 'Our suspect's local, I'm convinced of that.'

‘What, you think Harold Watkins knew his attacker?’

‘If not, he knew someone who did.’

Mason raised an eyebrow. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘No signs of breaking and entering, Sergeant. It’s as simple as that.’

‘Possible, but I’m—’

‘Let’s sleep on it, see what the old man has to say to you in the morning.’

After glancing around, the DCI turned on his heel and took off towards the carpark. Thank God it was over. No more running around chasing his tail. As usual, it had been a tiring day, and he was really looking forward to his evening out with Brenda. Still undecided on where they would eat—he was working on it.

# CHAPTER THREE

Jack Mason entered Hackney Central in a somber mood the following morning. The news of Harold Watkins' sudden death had hit home hard. Seldon did a murder victim get to him, but this crime had left a nasty taste in the sergeant's mouth. Beaten about the head without ever gaining consciousness was not exactly the nicest way to die, not in anyone's books. Mason shuddered to consider his family's reaction. His flat was a mess, everything overturned, and thieves had stolen all his worldly possessions.

Speed was essential. Whoever had carried out such a despicable act would be keen to shift their ill-gotten gains. That's how these crimes predictably panned out, especially in London.

There were dozens of black-market outlets Mason could think of, and any of them would know how to handle the old man's stolen possessions. It was all about contacts, striking the right deal, and finding the right outlets to shift your spoils. Many were legitimate businesses, or "fronts" as they were better known. Once stolen property hit the black market, it was impossible to trace.

It had taken Jack Mason a little over an hour to set the complex machinery of a murder enquiry in motion. By eleven o'clock, with sufficient evidence of the victim's last activities collected, planning would be straightforward. This wasn't a spontaneous attack on a defenceless elder; the intruder

organized this crime, as if he knew what he was looking for.

The briefing room was small, low ceilinged, with two sash windows overlooking the main carpark. As usual, there was a mad scramble for seats. Ten straight-backed chairs laid out in a single row in front of an evidence board, the rest of the team standing shoulder to shoulder at the back of the room.

Hands deep in pockets, Mason felt a ripple of excitement as he stood in front of the assembled team. The mechanics of a murder investigation could be quite daunting, but he was keen that *Operation Cello* got off to a solid start. He guessed there were about twenty officers crammed in here—forensics, SOCOs, road traffic, CID, uniformed police officers—most of them familiar, and a few hoping for their first big break. The only person absent was DCI Cummins. Called unexpectedly to Superintendent Smyth's office for a progress update, his presence was noticeably lacking.

The room fell silent.

'Okay,' Mason began. 'Around 17:00 on January 22nd, two officers were called to a house burglary over on Clapton Park Estate after a neighbour reported a male occupant was lying face down on his living room floor. When the Emergency Services arrived at the scene, they found an 82 year-pensioner suffering from serious head wounds. Taken to Homerton University Hospital and placed on a life-support machine, he sadly succumbed to his injuries in the early hours of this morning.'

'I take it the press are already aware of the incident?' said DC Jones, an astute forward-thinking detective in his late twenties.

'Yes. They are.'

‘Pity,’ Jones replied, shaking his head. ‘Do we know what other injuries the victim sustained?’

‘Apart from serious head wounds, he suffered three broken ribs, severe bruising to the neck and back, and minor lacerations to his face and upper limbs. This was a vicious attack, which poses an obvious increase of danger to the wider public.’ Mason waited for the noise levels to die down before continuing. ‘What I can tell you is that the victim’s name is Harold Watkins. Well-known locally, Watkins worked in London’s docklands for several years.’

‘Having read the initial reports,’ said DC Summers, ‘I take it only one person was involved in the actual attack?’

‘That’s correct.’ Mason took a deep breath. ‘Let’s not jump to conclusions at this stage, not until we see what the coroner’s report throws up.’

‘Could others be involved?’

‘They could, but according to forensics they never entered the flat.’

‘What about immediate neighbours?’ Evans from CID asked. ‘Did anyone see or hear anything?’

‘Not to my knowledge they didn’t.’ Mason rolled his eyes and shrugged. ‘The problem is, no one will come forward and we face a wall of silence.’

‘Fear of reprisals, more like,’ Evans replied.

Mason glanced at his notes. Forensics had revealed little about the perpetrator. There were no witness statements, few fingerprints, and minimal hard evidence. These things took time, he realised that, but the media’s insatiable demand for answers would soon rear its ugly head.

He chose his next words carefully.

‘According to the police doctor’s report, we know the attack took place between the hours of 10:30 and 11:30 am on Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup>. This means the victim remained unconscious for at least five hours before someone finally discovered him.’

‘Any word back on the murder weapon?’ one of the senior detectives cut in.

‘Nothing yet.’ Mason narrowed his eyes a fraction. ‘Initial reports show that blunt force trauma to the back of the head was the probable cause of death. They used a heavy wooden object—a baseball or cricket bat, something of that nature.’

John Chambers, a dapper detective constable in his late thirties and former Essex County cricket player, raised a hand. Around six foot-one, he stood much taller than Jack Mason. ‘What about CCTV coverage?’ asked Chambers, pointing up at the street map. ‘Do we have any in the area?’

Constable Summers was quick to react. ‘Nothing of interest has shown up, but uniforms are still working on it.’

‘No word from the lab on the fingerprints yet?’ Mason asked.

‘Later today, Sarge. They’re hoping to find a match on the database.’

DC John Callum, a balding, eagle-eyed detective, waved his hand in the air. ‘This gold presentation watch that has gone missing during the attack. What more do we know about that?’

Mason turned sharply to Callum after drawing the team’s attention to an image pinned to the evidence board. ‘Based on the information so far, it appears to be a man’s gold Vacheron Constantin wristwatch quite like this one,’ he said.

Callum shrugged. ‘If its identity is readily discernible,

someone will have melted it down for its scrap value.’

‘That would seem the most obvious way to dispose of it,’ another agreed.

‘Let’s not get carried away,’ Mason said firmly. ‘This watch is incredibly valuable, and most disreputable pawn brokers would accept it without question.’

‘Find the watch, and it could lead us back to our suspect.’

‘Exactly,’ Mason replied.

Summers sounded surprised. ‘Hang on a minute. If the old man wore it when the attack happened, someone must have taken it from his wrist at some point.’

Mason nodded. ‘That’s true—’

‘I’m not happy with this. Could this be the work of an opportunistic thief?’

Mason dug his hands in his pockets as he stared out of the office window. The constable was right, Watkins never let it out of his sight according to close friends. It was a prized possession, a lifetime’s memories spent working in the London Docks. No, the sergeant thought, whoever stole it obviously knew its true value. The more he thought about it, the more aggravated robbery sprang to mind. Friendships ran deep, and unsolved murders never rested kindly on a comrade’s mind—let alone give closure. Surely someone would come forward if they ever spotted it again.

Mason pointed to a map of the Clapton Park Estate. ‘There’s been a lot of complaints lately regarding local youths making a nuisance of themselves on the estate. I want a list of their names, and anyone else seen in the vicinity around the time the attack took place.’

‘What about known burglars?’ asked DC Callum.

‘I was coming to that,’ the sergeant answered firmly.

His response provoked an enthusiastic murmur, and they floated a flurry of potential candidate’s names. This wasn’t as easy as Mason had first thought, and the questions were coming thick and fast. There were plans to set in motion, interviews to arrange, and dozens of suspects to be put under the microscope.

‘Okay,’ Mason said, looking at his watch. ‘DCI Cummins will hold a full team briefing later this afternoon, so let’s pull a list together of all the likely candidates.’

As the meeting drew to a close, Mason turned to Summers and said, ‘Fancy a drink?’

The constable looked at him confused. ‘Not whilst I’m on duty, Sarge.’

‘Who said anything about alcohol?’

‘I know how your mind works—that’s why I’m a detective.’

Mason grabbed his coat. ‘It’s time we paid a few local watering holes a visit.’

‘Anywhere in particular?’

‘Let’s start with the Clapton Hart and see what develops from there.’

‘Walking distance, eh?’

‘The exercise will do you good, Norwell.’

‘Just because I’m six years older than you doesn’t mean I’m not fit.’

Mason smiled at the constable’s spontaneous remark. Now nearing twenty-eight himself, his years in the Metropolitan had taught him many things. Above all, never to take anything for granted.

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The Clapton Hart was quiet, Thursday lunchtime being the low point of the week. A friendly pub, over the centuries it had traded as a stagecoach inn, guest house, and more frequently posed as a lively nightclub. Shady characters conducted many illicit transactions within these walls, and Mason was well-acquainted with its patrons.

‘How’s tricks, Reggie?’ the sergeant asked.

The bartender looked up from behind the bar and smiled. ‘Not a lot happening, if I’m honest, Jack.’

‘When’s payday?’

‘Tomorrow, and this place will hum with energy.’

A man in his late fifties, Reggie Brown had been a regular barman at the Clapton Hart for as long as Mason could remember. Not a fit man, overweight, with a large forehead and receding hairline, he had a broad Cockney accent.

‘If it’s food you want, the best I can offer is a bag of crisps.’

‘Better make it two pints of lager, and two bags of salt and vinegar!’

‘We’ve run out of salt and vinegar.’

‘What have you got?’

The barman reached inside a cardboard box and rummaged around. ‘You’re in luck. It’s the last two cheese and onion.’

Mason pointed to the mute television fixed to the back wall. ‘Football fan, Reggie?’

‘I like to watch the odd match now and again, and you?’

‘I’m a rugby man. London Wasps.’

‘Is that over in Sudbury?’

Mason sheepishly grinned. ‘It is.’

‘So, what’s the attraction with London Wasps?’

The sergeant took a long swig of his lager and stepped back a pace. ‘Many years ago, I was listening to a live match on the radio. It was the quarterfinals of the cup, and Wasps were playing Bath. It’s amazing how some things can grab your attention when you’re twelve-years old. The mere mention of *Wasps*, and I was hooked.’ Mason wiped the froth from his lips and slid the half empty glass on the bar. ‘I’ve followed them ever since. Even watched their first appearance in the John Player Cup knock-out competition back in eighty-six.’

The barman stared at him but said nothing.

Mason frowned. ‘We lost to Bath, 17 points to 25.’

‘Not a happy result, then?’

The sergeant ran the flat of his hand over the top of his head as he leaned over. ‘The old man assaulted on the Clapton Park Estate died early this morning, I heard.’

‘That’s sad,’ the barman sighed. ‘I was hoping he’d pull through.’

‘Did you know him?’

‘Not really.’

‘He drank here, I presume?’

‘Not in a long time.’ The barman cocked his head to one side. ‘Mind, a couple of regulars were talking about him only last night.’

‘Oh. What did they say?’

‘I heard it was a couple of jobs—damn teenagers. They should bring back the birch.’

Mason stared into his now empty pint glass and tried not to

make eye contact. ‘Young hooligans? I had not heard about that.’

The barman nodded sourly. ‘Yeah, kids picking on innocent bystanders for no reason at all.’

Mason wrinkled his nose. ‘Soft target by the sound.’

‘Same everywhere. Stratford’s rife with it. All these kids using the A12 to go to other parts of town to mug people, where are the police?’

‘Sounds a bit like the old Scottish border raids.’

The barman’s brow corrugated. ‘God knows. It’s getting out of hand. It’s time the government put a stop to it.’

Summers lifted his glass and stopped just short of his lips. ‘Stratford is rife with it, you say?’

‘So they tell me.’

‘Never heard that before,’ said Mason, shaking his head. ‘They say there’s been a lot of bother over at the Prince of Wales pub lately. I wonder if it’s connected?’

‘Could be the same bunch of yobs from Stratford.’ The barman looked at them and pointed. ‘Can I get you two gentlemen another drink?’

‘Same again for me,’ Mason replied. ‘What about you, Norwell?’

The constable looked down at his empty glass and grimaced. ‘No thanks. Not whilst I’m—’ he stopped mid-sentence, realising what he was about to say.

‘What about a half, then?’ Mason said, beaming like a Cheshire cat.

‘Better make it my last, as I’ve got a busy afternoon ahead of me.’

‘Haven’t we all!’

# CHAPTER

# FOUR

Jack Mason was sitting in his favourite armchair, sipping a Talisker single malt whisky watching ‘The X-Files’ on TV. Curled up beside him, Brenda was flipping through a baby catalogue and looking for blankets to go with the new “4-wheel travel system” she’d spotted in Mothercare. Mindful of the consultant gynecologist’s advice that she would need to take it easy over the next few weeks, they’d limited their nights out together to just once a week. Tuesday, quiz night, down at their local pub where they could chat and relax amongst friends.

As he let his mind drift, Mason remembered how they’d first met. He was on his way to the airport, funnily enough, having shared a taxi with Brenda. Within minutes of meeting, they’d ended up talking about their earlier holiday experiences. Not that he was looking for a relationship, he wasn’t. He preferred his own company, if he was honest. Being single suited his masculine hobbies, and he was unwilling to give anything up. But life was full of surprises, and within weeks of exchanging telephone numbers, they had met over dinner one night. In Knightsbridge, an upscale Italian restaurant near Harvey Nichols, where a meal cost a small fortune.

A few years younger than him, Brenda was easy to get on with. An attractive young woman, she had a sharp mind and a captivating charm, and notably, his profession as a police officer did not deter her. Within weeks of them hitting it off,

they slowly realised that theirs was not just a casual relationship. There was something more serious going on. Mason had never shared his secrets with another woman before, and this was all new to him. Brenda was perfect, and he could not have chosen a more suitable partner for the rest of his life.

Following an eventful honeymoon in the Caribbean, the couple had no intention of starting a family. Not immediately. Brenda excelled as a personal assistant in London. Nine months later, when she was pregnant with a baby girl, they bought a smart little two-bedroom property near Tower Hamlets. It had not been easy, but thanks to some hard graft and a ten-thousand-pound bank overdraft, they had somehow turned a small back room into a nursery and decorated it from top to bottom. Proud of his DIY handiwork, Mason had altered the kitchen layout, fitted dimmer switches and low-level lighting in every room.

With everything falling into place before the baby was due, a new drop side cot had arrived, together with a wide chest of drawers. The height was perfect for changing a baby according to Brenda, who believed it would provide ample future storage space for clothes.

Not all had gone to plan, though. Choosing the perfect name had been their biggest nightmare, as they could not agree on anything. Brenda was keen on Janet Alison, but when Mason pointed out the initials spelled out JAM, she quickly scuppered the idea. They eventually settled for Catherine, but neither liked the shortened version nor found a suitable replacement.

‘What have you been up to today?’ Brenda asked.

‘Not a lot. We’ve been looking for a stolen watch.’

‘Is that what you get up to all day?’

‘That, amongst other things.’

Brenda gave Mason a puzzled look. ‘What type of watch is it?’

‘It’s a Vacheron Constantine Geneve wristwatch.’

‘It sounds more like an Italian seaside resort to me. What’s so important about it?’

‘We suspect someone removed the item from the victim’s wrist hours after he lost consciousness in his apartment.’

‘This would not be over on Clapton Park, would it? The pensioner whom someone recently murdered.’

‘It was.’

Brenda raised her eyebrows a fraction. ‘It shouldn’t be too difficult a case to solve, by the sounds. Find the watch, and you’ll find your culprit.’

‘You should have been a detective, darling.’ Mason placed a reassuring hand on Brenda’s swollen stomach and could feel the baby moving inside. ‘Bambi’s active tonight.’

‘The minute I put my feet up she kicks off again. It happens every time, especially during the night. She seems determined to let me know who’s the boss around here.’

‘Sounds like a typical woman ... trying to get the last word in.’

Brenda managed a thin, wintery smile. ‘You better get used to the idea, Jack. You’ll soon have two women to contend with around the house.’

‘Wall to wall stereophonic women talk—I can’t wait.’

As he drifted into the kitchen to make some supper, he blew Brenda a kiss. Mason was quite looking forward to

becoming a dad and could not wait for the big day to arrive. Never in a million years did he think he would warm to the idea, but it couldn't come soon enough as far as he was concerned.

'What do you fancy for supper?'

'I've opened a fresh jar of pickled onions,' Brenda shouted through the open doorway.

'So I see. How many this time?'

'Better make it a large spoonful, any more gives me indigestion!'

Mason smiled resignedly to himself. It was weird how pregnant women suddenly developed a craving for some foods. Brenda's passion was pickled onions dipped in peanut butter, and she could not get enough of them. Thankfully, it wasn't cheese, as her dietitian had warned that mold-ripened soft cheeses can contain bacteria that may harm the baby. He had read somewhere that some cravings, such as sour foods like lemons, pickles, or salty foods were a pregnant woman's body's way of getting a variety of nutrients the baby needed. Unsure of its truth, he was confused.

'I've been thinking about this murder enquiry you're now involved in,' Brenda shouted through.

'What about it?'

'How involved are you?'

'It's still early days, but the man leading the investigation has told me I'm to head up a small investigation team.'

There followed a long pause.

'They will give you paternity leave once our baby arrives, won't they?'

'I'm hoping to have caught the killer by then, darling.'

Besides, there are dozens of competent officers who can step into my shoes once Bambi arrives.'

'I hope you're not just saying it to appease me.'

'Of course not. What makes you think I'd do such a thing?'

'I know you of old, Jack. You've been working a lot more overtime since your promotion to Detective Sergeant.'

'It just seems that way, darling. I can assure you I'm not.'

'Well,' Brenda sighed. 'It certainly seems like I'm spending an awful lot more time on my own lately.'

Mason felt his stomach lurch. This marked his inaugural murder investigation as the leader of a small detective team, and he was resolute in making a strong first impression. Failure wasn't an option, and God forbid someone else stepping into his shoes at this critical stage in the investigation. It did not bear thinking about.

Returning from the kitchen he gripped Brenda's hand firmly but gently. 'I know there's a lot going on in our lives at the moment, but once Bambi arrives everything will fall into place.'

Brenda screwed her face up. 'I've heard that somewhere before, Jack.'

'It's true. I promise you—'

'Try pulling the other leg.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Once you get your teeth stuck into something, you're like a dog with a bone. You cannot stand failure, and never could.'

Mason squeezed Brenda's hand and gave her a loving smile. 'Trust me, darling. The minute Bambi arrives I will be out of my office quicker than a rabbit out of a magician's hat.'

Brenda gave him a suspicious look. 'Really?'

# CHAPTER FIVE

Tony Abbott, the Southside leader, peered out through the gap in the bedroom window blinds just as another police van pulled into the street. This was the third in as many hours, and he was furious. The police were everywhere, and their stop and search tactics on the estate screwed everything up, making life a misery. These next few hours would be crucial if they were ever going to take back control of the streets.

So many demanding questions, so much uncertainty, it was driving him mad. He would meet with his counterpart on the north side of the estate and negotiate a truce. It would be difficult. Despite his awareness, life on the Clapton Park Estate never ran smoothly, a situation exacerbated by the Metropolitan's recent regaining of control.

Abbott punched the number into his phone and waited for a connection.

'Yow,' the voice on the phone spat out.

'We need to talk.'

'About what?'

The North Boys leader wasn't the friendliest person on earth to deal with, not at any time. The man had attitude and would not think twice about slitting your throat if he felt it would enhance his street credibility. He would need to tread carefully, be patient, and win the idiot over to his way of thinking.

'It's the filth,' Abbot replied.

‘What about them?’

‘The whole of Southside is crawling with them. Dogs everywhere, stop and search teams on every street corner, you name it, it’s happening.’

‘Same here,’ came back the muted reply.

‘Well?’

‘Well, what?’

‘If we don’t act soon, we’ll go into meltdown,’ the Southside leader said in the toughest voice he could muster.

Another long pause.

‘Like shit. Anyone who steps out of line on my patch knows what to expect.’

‘It ain’t about muscle anymore, bruv. I’ve heard rumours.’

‘About what?’

‘Cannot say over the phone. That’s why we need to connect.’

‘Ronnie’s Coffee Bar in fifteen minutes. Alone!’

Abbott’s phone went dead.

Frustrated, the Southside leader stared out of the window, thinking. Ever since the old man over in Ambergate Court popped his clogs, the estate had gone into meltdown. No one could move in or out without the police knowing about it. It wasn’t good, and it was time to put a stop to it.

Wearing his trademark hoodie, blue jeans, and white trainers tied loosely, Abbott shuffled awkwardly towards the bathroom landing. He was craving a fix, something to settle his nerves and take his mind off outside influences. The sheer number of police officers roaming the estate made his blood boil. They were the real enemy, and the worst thing anyone could do was to cooperate with them. But people talked, and you

never knew who might say something when the chips were down. Knocking on your door in the middle of the night was the Metropolitan's favourite pastime. Unnecessary shit.

Abbott had decided against carrying a blade. Far too risky, he thought. The last thing he would need would be to be hauled into a police station and his dabs taken. Most gang members' names were already on file, and many were proud of it. The problem was that whenever they dragged you into the Nick for questioning, you never knew what charges they might throw at you. The police were unpredictable.

Shuffling downstairs, the kitchen door was on the latch. He eased it open just as another police van crept into view. Of all the police officers, he hated the dog handler teams the most. Dangerous bastards. Vicious. Once they let the hounds on you anything could happen—and usually did. They could bite you in the nuts, rip off your arm, and bring you to ground in the blink of an eye. If he had a shooter, he would blow their brains out and live the rest of his life in peace.

'Well, maybe.'

As the K-9 van crawled past him at a snail's pace, Abbott froze. The filth inside looked docile enough, but you never could tell with these doods. Faking it was commonplace, and showing disinterest was another trick they used. Then again, they were probably listening to radio two. If not, they'd be twiddling with their Rubik's cubes trying to get the colours to match.

'*Dumb bastards,*' he cursed.

Once the K-9 van had disappeared, the Southside leader shrugged down in his hoodie and slipped into the street. This was his patch, his domain, and no one was ever going to take

it from him.

His cunning plan to evade the police had failed, leaving him trapped in his bedroom far longer than expected. How would he convince Zelly that their territory was now under siege? Would he even listen?

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It was nine o'clock, and there were dozens of vehicles parked up outside Ronnie's Coffee Bar. A few he recognised, others he had never seen before. His hoodie pulled low over his face, Abbott hung around in the newsagent's doorway and waited. The chances of spotting him were slim, but sometimes the police got lucky. He would keep a low profile, bide his time, and move when the coast was clear.

He lit up a cigarette he had nicked from his mother's kitchen drawer and blew out a long smoke trail. The coffee bar was full, and his counterpart was occupying a window seat and playing to the crowd.

Was he carrying a blade?

Twenty feet to his left, two men were staring out of a long wheel-based transit van. One was mid-forties and fat, the other scrawny and older. Dressed in blue overalls, open-neck shirts, and looking decidedly pissed off, they looked like garage mechanics. They could be undercover officers making things difficult, or informants causing trouble. Whoever they were, Abbott could smell rats a zillion miles away, and these two individuals smelled clean.

Seconds later, he was inside and staring across at his archenemy.

‘Took your time,’ the North Boys leader’s voice boomed out.

‘What are you banging on about?’

‘This better be good, cos I’ve got deals on hold.’

Abbott scooted his chair. It wasn’t a place you would find in any tourist guide, but it served as neutral ground. Norman’s-land stuck in the middle of the estate and separating the two warring factions from serious trouble. Today felt different, though. Something menacing hung in the air, a threat to their territories.

Abbott looked at Zelly, who responded with a nod. ‘What have you heard, bruv?’

‘I was about to ask you that same question, dumb motherfucker.’

Brian Fagan, aka Zelly, was a year older than him. Much taller, more physical. Not the nicest person to hang out with. If the man had half a brain, he’d realise his territory was under threat. He didn’t, and that was Abbott’s dilemma. Zelly was thick-skinned, pig-headed, and ruled the North Boys with an iron fist. And that was another concern that had crossed Abbott’s mind that morning. How to win Zelly over?

Zelly had attitude, and a colossal ego to go with it. It was all about posture, strutting your stuff, and making your opponent feel inferior.

‘I’ve heard rumours,’ Abbott said through gritted teeth.

‘About what?’

‘The filth are looking for the scumbag who killed the old geezer over in Ambergate Court.’

Zelly’s eyes narrowed a fraction. ‘Nothing for you to worry about then.’

‘Don’t shit me. The suspect came from your neck of the woods.’

‘Well, it ain’t one of us, so it must be one of you.’

Abbott hunched his shoulders in a show of contempt.

‘What if someone’s trying to stitch the two of us up?’

‘Who?’

‘How the fuck would I know?’

Zelly’s eyes flashed like daggers. ‘What are you prattling on about?’

Suddenly, Zelly’s hands were under the table, and the room held its breath as the door opened and a known troublemaker named ‘Bixby’ swaggered in. The man, a local ruffian with a barbed-wire neck tattoo and a mouthful of decay, was notorious for seeking trouble.

Bixby’s small, flat eyes fixed on Zelly. ‘Yow.’

Abbott saw the shank, Zelly’s blade. A menacing long shank was sticking out from under the table. The North Boys’ leader just shook his head slowly, never taking his eyes off Bixby. The swagger had vanished, along with the threatening expression on the lowlife’s face. Wise move, Abbott thought. Another step closer and Zelly would have carved his name in the scumbag’s chest—big style.

With a disgusted snarl, Bixby stalked back out of Ronnie’s, the door slamming.

‘Let’s talk,’ Abbott said.

‘About what?’

‘These rumours—’

‘What rumours?’ Zelly said, patting the air.

‘Someone’s eyeing up our territory.’

‘Don’t shit me.’

‘It’s just what I’ve heard.’

Zelly’s eyes lit up at the mere mention of confrontation. ‘I’m all for a fight.’

‘We need to find out who’s behind it.’

‘You must know something, just give me a name.’

Abbott considered this, then changed tack. ‘How come the filth is hassling everyone on both sides of the estate? What is going on?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I reckon someone’s got an eye on our territory, bruv.’

‘That’s some serious shit,’ Zelly said angrily. ‘Like whom?’

‘Dunno, but it’s making me feel uncomfortable.’

‘Fuck fam. I knew something was wrong.’

‘I sensed it too, bruv. Now I know.’

Zelly laughed, a short barking sound.

‘Who’s pulling the strings?’

Abbott smiled. Finally, the penny had dropped. He leaned over and tapped the table with a finger. ‘We need to work together, bruv. North Boys and Southside as one. If not, we’ll be brown bread.’

Zelly nodded. ‘You are right. I’ll ask around and see what the word on the street is. These bastards need to be taken down... no respect.’

‘Agreed,’ Abbott nodded. ‘Let’s meet in twenty-four hours.’

An uneasy truce was called, but neither side would yield ground for fear of repercussions. Nothing was straightforward in Clapton Park, and compromise was an ugly word. Now that the police had taken back control of the streets, gangs moved

incognito. It was the only way.

Closing the coffee bar door, Abbott reached for a cigarette to mask his uncertainty. It was then he noticed what looked to be an unmarked police van. It sat parked outside the corner shop.

Uncertainty gripped him, and his mind raced.

Desperate to reach home territory, his pace quickened. Much safer in numbers, he thought. And if someone had eyes on his patch, he would deal with it as only he knew how.

# CHAPTER

# SIX

Jack Mason hated flawed journalism, and he was fuming. To blame racial hatred for the latest stabbing on the Clapton Park Estate was utterly ludicrous. The press was clutching at straws, manipulating the truth with the sole intention of increasing readership. Not only that, but their actions were stoking racial animosity, causing widespread outrage within the community. Serves them right, he thought. It was editorial vandalism gone mad.

Mason dropped the newspaper into his waste bin and turned his attention back to the evidence board. There was no mistaking the level of violence used in the attack. Blood spattered everywhere, ceilings and walls, but little in the way of hard evidence. They had opened a few leads, but an unbreakable wall of silence had met them. This case was fraught with danger, and gang leaders were masters of instilling terror. Sadly, that was the *modus operandi* for many incorrigible criminals.

From the moment he woke up, Mason found that his morning had taken a decidedly unfavorable turn, with every plan unravelling. Perhaps they'd overlooked something, a minor detail that would put them back on track. Something was amiss, and the sergeant perceived it. Beyond a few snippets of family gossip, no further details emerged, leaving their victim a complete mystery.

Close to Clapton Square, thick frost blanketed the rooftops

of St John's Mansions. The temperature had plummeted rapidly these past twenty-four hours, and the forecast was for heavy snow. It would not take much for the streets of Hackney to become grid locked with abandoned vehicles. Anything that could go wrong was going wrong.

Hands cupping a warm mug of black coffee, Mason cast a critical eye over the timeline and tried to take in the bigger picture. Apart from a few grainy images of potential candidates, nothing was clear cut. Not that he believed crime wasn't being committed on the estate, it was, and that worried him.

Based on Mason's experience, two gangs controlled Clapton Park Estate. One to the north, and one to the south. Though ASBOs abounded, they did not deter the gang leaders from continuing their campaign of fueling violence to keep a tight grip on their drug distribution networks. Dealers were everywhere. Behind the bowling alley, outside the newsagent's shop, and all along Rushmore Road. But attitudes were changing. Knives had arrived in the capital, along with baseball bats, cudgels, and sticks with nails. The increase of heavier drugs coming down from Birmingham had certainly left its mark on the city, stopping it was the problem.

As thoughts returned to the crime board, Mason was looking for inspiration and unsure of its source.

'How about we check out the local pawn shops?' DCI Cummins said as he joined him. 'Any more feedback?'

'Haven't heard a thing, Boss.'

'Pity. I was hoping someone would have pawned it by now. Find the watch, and it could open Pandora's box. Whoever is responsible knows what they're doing. If not, they'd have

moved it on by now.'

'That's assuming someone hasn't already melted it down for its gold content, of course.'

'That seems the safest option, but I'm not convinced that will happen.' Cummins turned to Mason and frowned. 'This was a professional job, and the person responsible knows how to deal with it.'

'An inside job, do you think?'

'Could be, and there's a strong hint of brinkmanship about the way they've gone about it.'

Mason looked at his boss oddly. 'Brinkmanship. What do you mean by that exactly?'

'See here,' Cummins said, tapping the crime board with the back of his hand. 'Only a few drawers were touched.'

The sergeant peered at the image and nodded.

'An opportunist thief, or someone rummaging aimlessly would have emptied everything, tipped out the contents, and sorted through it for anything of worth.'

'I agree.'

Cummins then directed his attention to the images of Watkins' corpse. 'And here, these wounds. What did the coroner say again?'

Mason flipped back through the notes on the desk. 'Blunt force trauma to the head, broken ribs, severe bruising to the neck and back, and minor lacerations to his face and upper limbs.'

'Now, did the coroner say when all these injuries took place?'

Mason shrugged. 'No—'

'Because I'd bet twenty pounds the injuries to the ribs,

back, and neck occurred after the head injury.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The head wound was terminal. The lacerations clearly self-defence. The rest...’

‘... just a cover-up? Make it seem like hooligans?’

Cummins nodded. ‘People are creatures of habit. They hide their valuables in the most obvious of places.’

‘Like under the floorboards, or stuffed behind furniture?’

‘Think about it,’ Cummins said. ‘Where do you hide the things that *you* don’t want people to find?’

‘Umm—I see what you’re getting at.’

‘This wasn’t a gang of hooligans who turned Harold Watkins’ flat over. They simply made it appear that way.’

‘Hence the brinkmanship?’

‘Precisely.’

Uncanny, Mason thought. Where others struggled to find answers, Cummins was logically working his way through the crime scene as if it were a worksheet. His performance was mindboggling.

Mason drained his second coffee of the morning and picked up a bundle of case files he had dropped on his desk earlier.

‘We still face the problem of lacking a checklist of stolen items, and no one has recorded the insurance cover. Neighbours described the old man as living a secluded life, rarely venturing outside his home.’

‘A professional criminal would have known that too,’ Cummins commented.

‘They could have,’ Mason agreed, ‘but I’m damned if I can find a connection.’

The chief inspector swivelled, his eyes meeting the sergeant's gaze. 'It's a well-known fact that old people hoard cash in their property, as they are far less mobile and cannot get to the banks as often as they would like. I remember my mother doing it. God bless her. She kept her money hidden in a biscuit tin at the bottom of the pantry.' Cummins tapped the crime board with the back of his hand again. 'The question we should ask ourselves is, did he plan to kill the old man, or was he intending to scare him off?'

'That puts a different slant on it, of course.'

'Indeed.' Cummins took a step back from the crime board, thinking. 'We need to find the murder weapon, as it will tell us a lot more about him.'

'If only,' Mason shrugged.

The chief inspector laughed aloud. 'Follow your instincts, Sergeant. Yes, there could be a connection to local gangs here, but I doubt it. Our suspect is keeping a low profile; it's a matter of weeding him out.'

'A local man?' Mason suggested.

'If not, they know someone who is.'

'An informant, perhaps?'

'Could be. It's beginning to look more like an inside job to me.' Cummins scratched the side of his head in thought. 'What about this Tony guy who threatened you at knifepoint? He could be pivotal in all of this. If we can link him to the crime scene around the time of the attack, it could be the breakthrough we are looking for.'

'I'm working on it.'

'Excellent. Let's bring him in for questioning. He is bound to know something.'

Mason could almost hear the cogs ticking away inside the chief inspector's head. It was informative watching him work, and he was learning a lot.

‘What about the stolen watch?’

‘It's still our best lead, so you'll need to keep an eye out for it. People talk. They make things happen when you least expect them to.’

‘Maybe I should put my feelers out.’

‘Tread carefully, Sergeant. Nobody knows this area better than I do. Informants can quickly bleed you dry for little or no reward.’ Cummins smiled. ‘The one golden rule I've learned over the years is, moles can work against you by selling your information on for a higher price.’

‘I'll bear that in mind, Boss.’ Mason nodded, already thinking about plans.

‘Let's see what this latest clampdown throws up. Gang leaders aren't daft. The minute we loosen our grip on the estate they will move back into it. When they do, we'll slip a couple of undercover operators into the area and find out what's going on.’

Mason jotted down a few notes.

‘What about other known felons in the area?’

‘Assume nothing in this game. Whoever carried out this atrocity will watch us like a hawk. That's how these people operate, behind the mask of uncertainty.’ Cummins smiled. ‘I know this is your first major assignment and you are keen to impress. Nothing wrong with that. I did the same myself when I took charge of my first small team of detectives. If you want some advice, take a step back and try not to rush things.’

‘I will find the person responsible, Boss. I give you my

solemn word on that.’

‘I’m sure you will.’

Mason held Cummins’ gaze. ‘Thanks for the advice, I appreciate it.’

‘Look, listen, and learn,’ the chief inspector said, tapping his head with a forefinger. ‘I would concentrate my efforts on the outlying estates. When residents are refusing to talk, it usually means that someone is intimidating them. The trick is to find out who.’

Nodding his thanks, Mason felt sure he was on the right track.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

There were no children playing on the streets of Tower Hamlets that afternoon, the only sound was police sirens passing. Busy times, Mason thought, as he turned his collar up against the rain and made towards the subway dubbed “Murder Alley.” Known as a RED SCORE on the Metropolitan Police crime matrix, this rundown part of the estate was a breeding ground for some of London’s most notorious felons. Driven by gangs with an increasing desire to profit from major crime, the only prospect for many low life offenders was to climb up the criminal ladder. Mason understood their mentality and their desires. Life was a bitch, and unless you fought your way out of the poverty trap, it was easy to fall through the cracks.

Not every resident was bad. There were several law-abiding citizens amongst the trash who terrorised the estate, but they were few. Knife crime ran rife here, and shootings were an all too regular occurrence. What the area needed was a release valve according to local pastor Claudette McDonald. Something to stem the violence. The issue was, she had buried more of her flock through violent street related gang wars than she dared to admit. Mason felt sorry for her and thought she was fighting a losing battle.

‘My only suggestion is to speak to Peter Daniels,’ the pastor said, sipping her tea.

‘Daniels? God’s Messenger?’

Pastor McDonald grimaced. ‘I’d rather we didn’t use that nickname, please, Detective Mason. But yes, having recently found God, Peter is doing remarkable work in the community.’

‘So, he’s a reformed man?’

The pastor’s response was hesitant and drawn out.

‘I take it you know Peter?’

‘The last I heard, he’d been let out of Wormwood Scrubs following a three-year stretch inside for dealing with stolen goods.’

‘Yes, I heard something about that.’

‘So, how did you and Peter meet?’ asked Mason.

‘He came via a friend. It’s incredible to see the transformation a person can undergo when presented with the right chance.’ The pastor held eye contact. ‘Peter has done an awful lot of sterling work in the community, especially here at the church.’

‘He’s a regular attender, I take?’

Pastor McDonald spread her hands expansively and laughed. ‘Peter is more community-minded. He helps me with the troublesome issues.’

Mason smiled inwardly. Peter Daniels had a reputation built on two pillars: a propensity for brutality and a career spent facilitating the movement of expensive, illicit merchandise for the East End underworld. Something didn’t sit right, and he would need to tread carefully.

Mason put his cup down as he stood to leave.

‘You’ve been most helpful, and I can’t thank you enough.’

‘It’s been a pleasure meeting you Detective Sergeant,’ Pastor McDonald replied.

He left through the vestry door.

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Hands in pockets, eyes peeled and fixed straight ahead, Mason decided against visiting the Greasy Spoon. Not today. It was far too risky. If the local Mafiosi caught him sniffing around one of their local pubs, he'd be in for a hiding to nothing. It was all about infiltrating the criminal underworld—talking to people in the know.

He knew Peter Daniels from old. The man was an out-and-out con artist who liked the smell of money and would do anything to get his hands on it. Strange, Mason thought. What was Daniels up to at the church?

It had stopped raining when Mason finally reached his destination—a redbrick tenement flat with a large entrance hall and wood panel flooring. Number twenty-four was on the second floor. An end flat, along a dimly lit corridor and overlooking a vandalised children's play area. He rang the doorbell and heard movement from within.

Seconds later, the door opened, and a short, thin man in his late thirties appeared wearing football shorts, a green T-shirt, and sneakers. He was carrying a wine bottle in his hand and had trouble written all over his face.

'What do you want?' he asked in an aggressive voice.

'I'm looking for God's Messenger,' Mason replied. 'Do you know where I can find such a man?'

'You police?'

'No. What makes you think I am?'

'Cos the last time those bastards paid me a visit they smashed my frigging door down.' Daniels looked quizzically

across at Mason. ‘They found nowt, but they still turned the place over.’

The sergeant feigned displeasure. ‘Sorry to hear.’

‘I’m no angel. I just live on an estate full of arseholes.’

‘Any chance I can come in?’

‘Not until I know who you are.’

‘A colleague of yours sent me. She thinks you can help.’

Daniels looked him up and down, then beckoned him inside.

The living room was small, and not as Mason had expected to find. Daylight poured in through the tilted window blinds, and airborne dust particles floated in a room that stank of stale cigarette smoke.

‘What’s on your mind?’ Daniels asked, turning sharply to confront him.

‘I’m looking for information.’

‘What kind?’

The man oozed confidence, bags of it, and obviously knew how to handle himself.

‘A few days ago, someone turned over my mate’s father’s flat, and the memory of it has left me restless and unable to sleep.’

‘Your friend’s father’s flat?’ Daniels shrugged, turning back towards what Mason assumed was the cramped kitchen.

‘Yeah. That’s right.’

‘What’s that got to do with me?’

The sergeant inhaled deeply. He’d never grown tired of rogues’ posturing; never got bored. What he was really after was hard evidence—and Watkins’ stolen watch was as good a starting place as any.

Mason never took his eyes off Daniels.

‘Whoever broke into my friend’s father’s flat stole several valuable items.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’m particularly interested in a gold watch.’

‘And?’

Mason managed a thin smile. ‘I worry that someone might melt it down for scrap, and I dread that outcome.’

‘What makes you think I can help?’

The sergeant trod cautiously. ‘Your colleague told me to contact you.’

‘Does she have a name?’

‘I’d rather not say.’

Daniels eyed him with suspicion. ‘What kind of watch are we talking about here?’

‘It’s a Vacheron Constantin Geneve. It has a round gold face with Roman numerals and an extra-flat mechanical hand winding mechanism.’

‘That’s an expensive piece of kit.’

‘Is it?’ Mason shrugged.

Daniels first looked puzzled, then affronted. ‘When did you report this watch as stolen?’

‘A few days ago, over on the Clapton Park Estate.’

‘And what makes you think I can help?’ Daniels repeated firmly.

Mason drew back knowing full well he was moving into dangerous territory. One fraudulent slip of the tongue, a mistimed answer, and he could end up facing the wrath of a hardened criminal. He stood for a moment, motionless, Daniels’ dark, inquisitive eyes bearing down at him.

‘I’m willing to pay top dollar.’

The mere mention of money and Daniels’ eyes lit up.

‘I sense you’ve not told me everything about your friend’s father.’

‘What is it you want to know?’

‘This isn’t the old man who was freeze-framed over on Ambergate Court, by any chance?’

‘It could be—’

‘If it is, you’re talking to the wrong person.’

‘Why is there a problem?’

Daniels chose his next words carefully. ‘What makes you think I’d want to get mixed up in a murder?’

‘I just want the watch returned.’

‘It’s not that easy. Lots of people will look out for it.’

‘Like whom?’

‘You’d be surprised.’ Daniels’ tone was aggressive. ‘Was he a relative of yours?’

‘No. Merely a friend.’

‘What’s your interest in this watch?’

Mason felt the knot in his stomach tighten. Daniels was asking all the wrong questions, and that worried him. It was time to alter his strategy to avoid discovery.

‘Can you get it back?’

‘Maybe. It ain’t free.’

Mason tried to hide his excitement. He swallowed hard and nodded. ‘I’ve heard nothing big happens around here without you knowing about it.’

Daniels shrugged. He was biding his time, bigging up the task. ‘Five hundred now. Five hundred on return.’

‘That’s an awful lot of money.’

‘Take it or leave it. You want your watch, it’s gonna cost you a grand.’

Mason tried to conceal his irritation at Daniels’ condescending tone. Now wasn’t the time for negotiation. He held out a hand, and Daniels shook it. There was a deal made, and the informant would hopefully stick to it. The sergeant’s biggest concern, if he could think of one, was that moles had their ears close to the ground. Should Daniels ever learn about his collaboration with an undercover police officer, his existence would turn into a nightmare.

The sergeant reached into his back pocket and pulled out a roll of marked banknotes.

‘Five hundred now, and five hundred when I get the watch back,’ he sighed.

Daniels’ eyes narrowed. ‘Give me a couple of days. I will see what I can do.’

‘Nice doing business with you,’ Mason said, shaking Daniels’ oversized, calloused hand.

The sergeant wrote his details down on a slip of paper and handed it to Daniels. This was a dangerous place to be caught out, and he was relieved to leave by the rear entrance.

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It had stopped raining when Mason reached the pre-arranged pickup point. Just out of habit, he checked his surroundings before sliding into the passenger seat of the unmarked Vauxhall Corsa. His heavy workload was wearing him down. Brenda was right, working too hard was asking for serious trouble. He felt worn out and exhausted, as if entering a cul-

de-sac on a dark, windswept night. He would need to ease back on the throttle. If that were humanly possible.

Constable Summers peered at him from the driver's seat and said. 'Any luck?'

'He took the bait, if that's what you mean.'

'What about the watch?'

'I'm confident he'll point us in the right direction.'

'Big fish in little ponds are usually dangerous predators, Sarge. If anyone knows the watch's location, it's Peter Daniels.'

'Let's hope you're right, cos I've just handed him five hundred quid of hard-earned police funds to get it back.'

'I hope you made him sign for it,' Summers grinned.

'Sod off.'

Seconds later they joined the steady flow of traffic heading west towards Hackney South. More than pleased with his arrangements, Mason was confident they were making steady progress at last. If Daniels led them to the watch's whereabouts, it would make life a lot easier. In his mind were two scenarios. If the killer had not moved or melted down the watch, they still possessed it. And if local gangs were not involved in the old man's murder, then who else was in the frame?

Thinking about this, he opened his notebook and jotted a few things down. It was then he remembered what DCI Cummins had told him about informants selling your information on to the highest bidder.

*Too late now*, he groaned.

Hopefully, Daniels would stick to their agreement.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Jack Mason was sitting at the kitchen table, watching breakfast television and sipping his coffee. Brenda was fast asleep in bed. Not wishing to disturb her, he showered and then dressed in the back bedroom. The much-anticipated heavy snowfall had not yet arrived. It was heading north, according to the weather experts, towards the Midlands and away from the capital.

It was Wednesday, and Brenda was meeting with friends that morning—after she had finished her aqua natal yoga class. Sometimes he wondered what all the fuss was about, as his wife detested swimming at the best of times. With only a few weeks to go before the baby was due, she swore it was nurturing her self-confidence.

Meanwhile, for him, these past few weeks had been a living hell. He had been working far too much overtime lately and not enough time at home. Brenda felt lonely, and he could not say that he blamed her. Mason had been a fool to think his workload would ease off whilst a killer was still on the loose.

*'One day,'* the sergeant muttered.

The drive to Clapton Park took a little over fifty minutes, with long tailbacks until reaching Rushmore Road. Upon entering the estate, a constable with a smug expression halted the car, his imposing presence immediately making itself known. Security was tight, it had to be, as this was a full-on murder enquiry.

‘Anymore trouble from local youths?’ Mason asked as he slowed to stop, flashing his warrant card.

‘No, Sarge,’ the constable replied. ‘It’s been relatively peaceful these past few days.’

‘Really?’

The sergeant climbed out of the unmarked BMW pool car and habitually checked his watch. Following DCI Cummins’s line of thought, it was quite possible the killer was someone from the area. Most police officers he knew worked on their instincts. It was a copper’s nose—akin to a trained drug dog sniffing out narcotics in a crowded airport. Regardless of the number of criminals removed from the streets during an investigation, there were plenty more to step into their shoes. Some occupations were never short of recruits, and being a criminal was one of them.

On reaching the tenth floor, Mason tried to get his head around it all. How someone could callously bludgeon a frail old pensioner to death beggared belief. More than anything else, Mason hated those who picked on the old and vulnerable, as there was no real recovery from the physical and mental cruelty it caused. This case was slightly different, though, and had changed his thoughts on the way people reacted when put under pressure. The killer had instilled so much fear into the estate that no one would speak, let alone walk alone.

It was a sad situation, and Mason had never wavered in his abhorrence towards the killer’s lack of empathy.

*Who would be next?*

The living room was small, with commanding views overlooking the west bank of the Hackney Cut and the River Lee. To his right lay Stratford and West Ham Park, further

afield the county boroughs of East Ham and Barking. Not that he would ever choose to live here, but the outlook was stunning.

Mason swivelled on his heels the moment he heard the hallway door open.

‘Detective Sergeant Mason?’ the visitor said. ‘George Coleman, forensics.’

They had never met before, but Mason was aware of Coleman’s thoroughness in investigating a crime scene. Bald except for a few gray chevrons above the ears, he had a thin face and wore thick, horn-rimmed spectacles now perched on the top of his head. Dressed more for comfort than appearance, Coleman’s mud-spattered shoes told him this was not the officer’s only port of call that morning. These were busy times, and everyone had to work flat out to close leads.

‘Pleased to catch up with you, George,’ Mason said, his hand extended.

‘This isn’t your first visit to the flat, I take it?’

‘No,’ Mason explained. ‘I’m going back over old ground in case I’ve missed out on something.’

‘Same here, you can never be too thorough,’ Coleman agreed. The forensic officer stared at his clipboard and frowned. ‘Is there anything I can help you with before I make a start?’

‘There is one thing,’ Mason said thoughtfully. ‘You can walk me through what actually took place here.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Coleman gestured towards the open doorway. ‘According to the post-mortem report, the victim suffered blunt force trauma to the head. This was a nasty assault, and the poor sod didn’t stand a chance.’

‘Pre-meditated do you think?’

‘Nothing else fits the frame. There is still plenty of lab work to get through, which could throw more light on the situation, of course.’

Mason nodded as he took down some notes. A confident officer by the sounds, Coleman was walking him through a set sequence of events he already knew. He watched as the forensic officer’s eyes narrowed a fraction and sensed an underlying resentment in his voice. This type of crime was never easy, and police officers responding to such incidents always felt the gnawing uncertainty that the perpetrator might escape justice. It was all about tying up loose ends, making sure you had covered every eventuality.

‘It’s a pity we still haven’t recovered the murder weapon,’ Mason said.

‘Yes. Whatever he used to attack his victim with he used it with considerable force. It’s a blessing in disguise that the old man never recovered, as bone fragments had punctured his brain and would have left him in a vegetative state for the rest of his days.’

Mason winced. ‘Nasty. What’s your take on it exactly?’

Police found Harold Watkins unconscious beneath the lounge window. The police doctor in attendance stated that someone struck him several blows to the left side of his skull during an escalated attack.

‘Any indication how long it lasted?’

‘Hard to say.’ Coleman paused in thought before pointing to blood spatter running across one of the interior walls. ‘The force of the blows caused irreparable damage to the cerebellum, which rendered him unconscious at some point.’

Looking at the injuries, it's my view this wasn't a prolonged attack.'

'If someone discovered him beneath the window, might someone have dragged him there afterward?'

'No. There is no evidence suggesting that anyone ever moved the body.'

Mason raised his eyebrows. 'And we know he didn't put up much of a fight?'

'The evidence points to that. From the angle of the body blows, the victim was trying to move away from his attacker rather than resist. We know the assailant is lefthanded because of the angle of the wounds. That narrows it down significantly.'

'I've been thinking about that,' Mason added.

Coleman smiled. 'He could be ambidextrous, of course.'

As far as Mason could remember, the injuries outlined in the post-mortem report were consistent with what Coleman had been telling him. Dr James Penny, the Home Office Pathologist, had reported multiple fractures to the left side of the skull and seven heavy bruise marks to the upper body. Two to the left side of the head, two to the left shoulder, and three to the upper torso. But of everything, it was the sheer level of destruction to the property that concerned Mason most. Uprturned furniture, broken ornaments strewn about the floor, and clothes scattered around like confetti. It felt like the aftermath of another case he had worked on.

'Strange, no fingerprints,' Mason said thoughtfully.

'He wore surgical gloves. He came prepared.'

'What else did you find?'

'We recovered minute traces of soil samples from the

living room carpet. It's consistent with samples found along the Lee Navigation.'

'Brought here by the victim?' the sergeant suggested.

Coleman hesitated. 'We found no traces of it on any of the victim's footwear.'

'That is interesting. The suspect, perhaps?'

'Could be. Perhaps a neighbour was responsible.'

Mason made a note of it, then pocketed his notebook. Why hadn't they noticed that before? He knew it was a gradual process, but still. As the dawn of a new forensic era broke, authorities began collecting DNA samples from potential suspects, meticulously cataloging them onto a national data register once they were in custody. The future looked bright, and it could not come fast enough as far as Mason was concerned.

As his eyes toured the room, the sergeant noticed a distinct lack of valuables on show. Information was a detective's lifeblood. It came in many guises: interviews, criminal records, informants, newspaper reports, and people often found it tucked away in coroners' reports. No, Mason thought. They were doing everything possible. Something would surface and normally did. If it wasn't local gossip that caught the murderer out, it would be something they had stolen and tried to move on.

Hands in pockets, Mason stared out of the tenth-floor window and pondered his options. He would need to be patient, bide his time, hoping the killer would make a mistake. Had they missed something; a vital piece of evidence, or was someone not telling them the truth? They were on the right track; he was certain of that, but nothing jumped out at him.

‘Thank you, George. At least I now have a clear picture of what took place here.’

‘Glad to help.’

Mason grimaced. ‘These soil samples you recently discovered, we need to take a closer look. If our suspect approached the crime scene from the direction of the Lee Navigation, it could put a whole new slant on things.’

Coleman nodded. ‘I’d check along the riverbank if I were you. Stay within a five-mile radius of the nearest point from here, and you will not go wrong. It might be worth talking to the narrowboat community... find out what they have to say.’

‘Sounds like a plan.’

Coleman made a little sweeping gesture. ‘When I’m finished here, I’ll fax you a copy of my report. You never know, it might throw up a few fresh leads.’

Mason nodded his appreciation.

‘Thanks again. That would be extremely useful.’

# CHAPTER NINE

There was something about The Buzzcocks that suited the atmosphere perfectly. The louder the better, Tony Abbott thought. It was eight-thirty and, apart from a couple of pensioners drinking coffee, Ronnie's Coffee Bar was empty. He needed something to stimulate his adrenal glands, and "Harmony in My Head" was perfect. Deep down, Abbott wasn't sure how his meeting with Zelly would pan out. Now that the police had surprisingly eased their stranglehold on the estate, he was keen to break ties with the North Boys. There were deals to be struck, old scores to settle, and he was itching to get moving.

Abbott scooted a seat up opposite Zelly and hunched his shoulders. But that wasn't all—something odd had caught his attention that morning, and it caused him to burst out laughing.

'What's with the bright orange shades, bruv.'

The North Boys' leader drew back in his seat unimpressed. 'Don't shit me. What have you heard?'

'The old bill is moving out.'

Zelly's face twitched. 'And?'

'We're both in the clear, bruv.'

Zelly poked a threatening finger at Abbott. A defiant gesture. Intimidating. With neither gang leader willing to back down, a full-blown confrontation was imminent.

'For now, but the mother fucks will be back.'

‘What have you heard?’

Zelly gave Abbott a toxic look. ‘They’re still hanging around Ambergate Court.’

‘Don’t crap me.’

‘Yeah. And they’re looking for something.’

Abbott tried to conceal his frustration at Zelly’s tone. ‘Not heard that. What are they looking for?’

‘I dunno.’

Abbott shot Zelly a daggers’ look. ‘Why be bringing it up if you ain’t heard something?’

‘Cos.’

‘Cos, what?’

‘Word is, thieves pilfered a shit-load of valuables from the old man’s place, and they want them back.’

‘Like what?’

‘Dunno,’ Zelly said angrily. ‘I wasn’t there!’

Abbott was about to say something, but quickly thought better of it. Zelly’s demeanour had changed, as if the fuse had been lit. But Zelly wasn’t smart, and his look was confused, as if grappling to kick his dumb brain into gear.

‘What now, bruv?’

‘Biz as usual, eh?’

‘So, our deal is off?’

Zelly pushed back in his seat. ‘What do you think?’

It was then Abbott realised that his back was to the door and Zelly wasn’t alone anymore. There were others, and they were spoiling for a fight. Abbott gripped the tubular metal armrests of his chair and felt the sides flex. It wasn’t the best environment to be caught up in, not without a blade. Deep down, he felt sorry for the North Boys’ leader. If the man had

half a brain, he'd be dangerous.

Abbott stood to leave.

'Stay cool, bruv.'

Well, what did Zelly expect? In truth, Abbott had always fancied his chances as the kingpin of the estate, it was the driving force behind every decision he made. There was big money to be had, girls, power, and everyone looked up to you. Sure, two of his boys had gotten merked, stuck by blades over street corners. But that was the risk you took. And the rewards ... the rewards were everything.

Abbott beat a hasty retreat from Ronnie's Coffee Shop and braced himself for the inevitable. The streets had become dangerous again, and anything could happen. The moment he stepped into the newsagent's shop and saw the headlines, he froze:

**POLICE CLOSE TO ARRESTING HAROLD  
WATKINS' KILLER.**

'Holy shit,' he gasped.

Something dark stirred in the pit of the Southside leader's stomach, and not for the first time he felt vulnerable that morning. Shit happened, but this was scary stuff. News never bothered Tony. Old white dicks writing about shit they didn't know or understand and not giving a toss about what was really going down on the streets.

Unsure of his next move, Abbott tucked the newspaper inside his coat and made a quick dash for the newsagent's door. He wasn't daft and knew that press junk-it was always out to make money. That's what paid the bills. The news was pure dynamite, and its source was clearly identifiable.

But who was feeding them crap?

For a start, if the police had a dodgy dealer in mind, they would have pulled them in before now. And another thing, why flood the estate with police muscle? None of it made sense. He knew big brother was completely ineffective against gangs and had been so ever since the Misuse of Drugs Act. That the police were protecting its citizens from street crime was utter bollocks. There again, he reasoned. Show signs of weakness and the chasing pack would rip you apart as soon as look at you.

Abbott hunched his shoulders in an aggressive stance as he slipped into the street. He could not entirely ignore the fact that the North Boys may have stitched him up—like the moment they had tried to turn him over in Ronnie’s. Threats got little clearer than that, and this was serious stuff.

His phone rang, and he answered it.

‘What!’

‘The filth is back.’

‘No shit?’

‘Defo. You gotta believe me.’

‘Where?’

‘Southside is crawling with them.’

Abbott ended the call and stood for a moment. His only option was to instruct his dealers to cease operations and keep a low profile. The police were cunning and adept at questioning people.

What to do next?

# CHAPTER TEN

The High Street had altered little; it was just as Jack Mason remembered it. The barber shop had gone, along with the local tobacconist, which was now a fruit and veg shop with a brightly coloured facade. One thing that hadn't changed over the years was Tommy Robinson's betting shop, full of disillusioned punters dreaming of utopia. The funny thing was that Mason recalled the day it burned down.

It had been a Tuesday afternoon, and he'd been walking home from school. The first thing he had noticed was the smoke billowing out of the roof, spreading in all directions. By the time he'd reached the betting shop, it was completely ablaze. He had stood well back, watching the firefighters wrestle with the flames. They spent three hours of intense effort to gain control of the raging inferno. By then, the flames had reduced the building to a smoldering shell, thankfully with no casualties.

It was the talk of the estate, and rumours ran rife that the cashier had pocketed the entire weekly takings after setting fire to a storeroom. He thought he had gotten away with it, but he hadn't, of course. When the police raided the cashier's house and found ten thousand pounds stuffed under his daughter's mattress, he couldn't explain how it had gotten there. Arson was a common way to dispose of evidence, highlighting the peculiar lengths some people would go to.

Blinking away the memories, Mason stepped up to the busy

post office counter, flashed his warrant card through the protection screen, and made himself known.

‘Hello, Jack,’ the friendly female cashier smiled. ‘Long time no see. What brings you to this neck of the woods?’

Not a tall woman, petite with short blonde hair, Janet Jute had worked at the post office for as long as Mason could remember. He knew her brother, a drayman who had worked at the local brewery. But that was a few years ago.

‘Official business, I’m afraid,’ Mason replied.

‘How can we help?’

‘Reports show an illegal cash withdrawal occurred at your machine. I’m here to follow it up.’

Jute looked at him oddly. ‘What time was this?’

‘Last night. It showed up on the bank’s stolen card list.’ Mason frowned, thinking about the ramifications of this. ‘I’ve examined your machine, and it shows no signs of tampering.’

Jute hesitated. ‘How much did they take?’

Mason skipped the question. ‘Tell me about your security measures.’

‘The premises are burglar alarmed and there’s CCTV covering the front of the building, if that’s what you’re looking for.’

Mason leaned in closer. ‘I need to look at last night’s CCTV footage.’

Jute pursed her lips and nodded. ‘Give me a few minutes, and I’ll sort something out.’

‘Splendid,’ Mason replied.

She peered at him with suspicion before ducking under the counter. ‘I presume you’ll want the original tape?’

‘We do, and we’ll return it as soon as we’re finished.’

‘It’s not the best system in the world. I’ve reported it to head office on numerous occasions, but nothing gets done.’

Not wanting to get involved in internal politics or small talk, Mason remained tight-lipped. Whoever had made a cash withdrawal was not a million miles from Harold Watkins’ flat. But there lay another problem, as experienced criminals were devious and usually got someone else to do their dirty work for them.

‘Will that be all?’ said Jute, handing Mason the cassette.

‘Yes, for now. Thank you.’

She looked at him pensively. ‘Like I say, I wouldn’t pin my hopes on it if I were you.’

‘This isn’t the first time, then?’

‘You’d be surprised, Jack.’

‘Really?’

‘Sure. Once we close up, it happens regularly. In just the last two weeks, I know of at least two trapping devices that we have removed from the machine.’

Mason cocked his head to one side. ‘Trapping devices. What’s that all about?’

‘It’s a device they fit to the card slot which prevents it from returning. Nothing sophisticated, but once you have left the area, they simply lever it out of the slot along with your card entry details.’

‘Crikey!’ Mason groaned. ‘Is there no end to what these people get up to?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ She picked up a pile of envelopes, then put them down again. ‘Yours is not the only bank account that someone has tampered with in the last three months. We have dealt with dozens of them.’

Mason stared at her in disbelief.

‘It doesn’t sound good.’

‘It’s not. So now you know, you can help us out?’

‘Leave it with me.’

Mason signed for the cassette and left into the bright sunshine. It wasn’t all grave news. Thanks to his hunch, a fresh set of leads had emerged.

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Now onto his second cup of coffee, Mason stared at the small team of police officers huddled around the monitor screen. Janet Jute was right: it wasn’t the best CCTV footage. The images were grainy and blurred, but at least they were making progress.

From what he could see, the suspect was wearing a black hoodie pulled low over his head and obscuring his face from view. Not a muscular man by appearance, around six foot-two with long skinny legs and enormous feet, it wasn’t a lot to go at. But sometimes you got lucky and a culprit’s name sprang out at you. Not this time. Whoever had made the withdrawal from the post office cash machine knew how to avoid detection.

Despite their setbacks, after lunch, they pored over the Police National Database again. The PND, as it was better known, was a highly effective tool in their armoury and could save them an awful lot of legwork. Not only did it allow all UK police forces to share intelligence, it prevented serious organised crime from escalating out of control and kept the real serial offenders from committing further offences. Mason

loved it and could not stop singing its praises. It had its low points, of course, but the benefits far outweighed the risks as far as the sergeant was concerned.

An hour later, as they struggled to find anything in the multitude of pixelated images, the chief inspector joined them. Smartly turned out in a brown three-piece suit, Cummins was a snappy dresser. The visual image played an important part in the chief inspector's everyday appearance. Nothing wrong with that. If anything, it sent out a powerful message that you were dealing with a professional at the top of his game.

It was Friday, and with the weekend looming ever closer, there was always the possibility of having to stay late and finish the job. Not that Mason would ever complain, but after a long arduous week chasing shadows, he was looking forward to some quality home time with Brenda.

Cummins linked his hands behind his neck as he listened to Mason's explanation. His face more serious than usual, he kept shaking his head as if irritated by something. Not one for giving much away, the chief inspector finally leaned over and pointed to the computer screen.

'Can we sharpen the image?'

'That's the best I can do,' PC Sheila White replied.

'Blimey, no wonder you are struggling. Let's rewind to the previous user.'

'What are we looking for?' asked DC Chambers, now in charge of the door-to-door enquiries.

Cummins digested the latest information, then instructed White to fast-forward the tape to its original position. 'Hold it right there,' the chief inspector demanded. 'Notice the way he picks the credit card out of the cash machine after he's

completed the transaction—our suspect’s naturally lefthanded.’

‘You’re right,’ Mason nodded.

‘And we know our killer’s lefthanded,’ added Chambers.

‘Yes, but that doesn’t mean it’s our man. What it tells us is, he’s testing to see if the card is still active. Had he not been, he would have withdrawn a lot more cash than fifty pounds.’

‘Why doesn’t he clear the entire account out?’ asked White.

Cummins smiled. ‘The bank has a restriction on how much money you can take out at once. The suspect will know that, so he’ll avoid suspicion by taking out small amounts.’

‘The crafty sod,’ White laughed. ‘But how the hell did he get hold of the old man’s card details in the first place?’

As White’s slender fingers danced over the keyboard like a pianist in concert, Mason explained. ‘The PIN was probably skimmed at some point, which all adds to the attack being planned.’

‘The crafty devil.’

Cummins puffed his cheeks out in thought. ‘We need to expand our enquiries over on the Clapton Park estate. Grab a few suspect screenshots and get the ground troops involved. If he is local, we could know him. In the meantime, let’s see what other surveillance cameras we have at our disposal. It’s my view he’s not the killer, but he may be in contact with someone who is.’ The chief inspector did a little jig-like dance as he pointed to the computer screen again. ‘How did he get hold of Watkins’ bank card? Who gave it to him? We need a clear picture of the suspect’s known movements—his favourite haunts, who he meets, and what he gets up to after dark.’

‘If he is local, he will obviously watch our movements,’

Mason replied.

Cummins acknowledged with a nod. ‘Any more news on the stolen watch?’ he asked.

‘No. Nothing,’ lamented DC Summers, who had sat quietly throughout.

‘I thought as much. What about your informant over in Tower Hamlets?’ Cummins said, turning to face Mason. ‘Has he said anything?’

The sergeant’s face dropped. ‘No. Nothing.’

‘Watkins’ watch is obviously too hot to handle at the moment. We need to be patient, keep our ears to the ground and wait for it to surface.’

‘What about future cash withdrawals?’ asked Chambers. ‘When will he make the big hit, do you think?’

‘He’ll not do that until he’s confident, the bank hasn’t cottoned on to him,’ Cummins pointed a finger at the crime board. ‘Which reminds me. We need to contact Watkins’ bank about future cash withdrawals. The first hint of any movement, we need to be on it like a flash.’

‘What are the chances of him using the same cash machine again?’ asked White.

Mason leaned over. ‘Slim, I reckon. It’s far too risky.’

‘I agree,’ Summers nodded.

Cummins quietly turned the pages of his notebook. The DCI was still in cheerful spirits, as well he might have been. His wife, Jennifer, had just had a tickle on the bingo, the first in a long time according to him. Nine-hundred and fifty pounds wasn’t an enormous sum of money, but it wasn’t to be sniffed at either. It could have been more had she not shared with a friend. But beggars could not be choosers, not with that

kind of windfall.

‘The missing murder weapon,’ said Cummins, looking up from his notebook. ‘Do we have anymore feedback from forensics?’

‘Nothing yet,’ the sergeant replied. ‘From what I gather, forensics believe the suspect went armed and took the murder weapon away with him when he left the victim’s flat.’

‘What makes them think the old man didn’t keep it hidden behind his door?’

‘He might have done, but the evidence shows he carried a weapon.’

Cummins’ eyebrows raised a fraction. ‘Even if he did, we need to cover every eventuality.’

Mason acknowledged, but said nothing.

‘Okay. There is plenty to be getting on with,’ the chief inspector said, as he arched his back in thought. ‘We need to think positively—watch, murder weapon, and witness accounts. Not necessarily in that order, but those are the major points of interest. In the meantime, I’ll talk to the Superintendent about getting some additional resources.’

As the meeting broke up, Mason’s desk phone rang.

‘Anything I should know?’ Cummins frowned.

‘It’s the wife, Boss. She’s spotted a 4-wheel travel system in Mothercare and is asking for advice on the colour.’

‘When is the baby due?’

‘In a couple of weeks.’

‘Let’s hope we catch our suspect before the sleepless nights kick in.’

‘Chance would be a fine thing.’

‘Yes. I fear you are right.’

Mason looked up from his desk feeling deflated. He had been sleep-deprived for weeks, and it was taking a toll. Look on the positive side, he thought. In a fortnight from now there will be two beautiful women to contend with—and a killer behind bars.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Earlier that morning, Mason had received confirmation that some numpty had made another cash withdrawal from Harold Watkins' bank account. The news had left him struggling to curb his emotions, and he was furious. He hated some crimes, particularly this one, and he'd made it a personal crusade to catch the culprit red-handed.

He was still deep in thought when Bob Cummins approached him in the corridor. The chief inspector was carrying a large bundle of case files tucked under his arm.

'Ah, the very man. Do you have a second?'

'Certainly, Boss.'

'It's about the Watkins murder case.'

'What about it?'

'I've been thinking about the victim's flat. If Watkins knew the killer, I find it incredulous that we haven't got a fingerprint match.'

'He may not have a criminal record.'

'It's possible, but if this was a planned attack, he's no beginner.' Cummins rearranged the files under his arm. 'Just on the off chance we've overlooked some vital piece of evidence, I've instructed forensics to take another look at the soil samples found in the victim's carpet. I'm curious what the connection is with the Lee Navigation.'

'I've been giving that some thought, Boss. There's every chance our suspect lives on the west side of the river, as it's

more densely populated.'

'What if he works on the navigation itself, or owns a narrowboat?'

Mason pondered Cummins' statement for a moment. 'It's possible, but highly unlikely, don't you think?'

'Not really. Something is not right. We need to get a team down there and find out what's really going on. Let's start with the narrowboat community. While life on a canal boat can be idyllic for much of the year, winters are a distinct challenge. People don't move around as much during a cold snap and normally stay static. It could be something or nothing, but I've got a positive feeling about this.'

'I'll see to it, Boss.'

'Anything come of the post office video footage we looked at the other day?'

'It's strange you should ask, as I'm about to head over to Kingsland.'

'Kingsland?' Cummins queried.

'We've received reports of another cash withdrawal from Watkins' bank account.'

'It's not the same machine, by any chance?'

'No, sadly. This one's close to Hackney Central tube station.'

'That's a very busy area.' The chief inspector paused for a moment. 'There must be plenty of security cameras in the vicinity, surely?'

'There is.'

'We need to get them checked out.'

Mason pursed his lips, taking his time before answering. 'That's the second withdrawal in as many days, and both

within a two-mile radius of each other. He's definitely local.'

'It would appear so.'

'Someone knows who he is... surely?'

Cummins transferred the bundle of case files to the other arm. 'Before I forget, something else occurred on Clapton Park Estate; a young lad got stabbed in the arm.'

'What time was this?'

'Around eight o'clock according to the duty desk sergeant.'

The mere mention of another knife attack churned Mason's stomach. It was Sod's Law, something else kicking off at the most inconvenient time. No sooner had the police withdrawn from the estate, the gangs returned.

'We need more eyes on the estate, Boss.'

'While I admire your enthusiasm, I'm the one accountable. Try not to rush into it. Let's send a couple of PCSOs down there and see what this is all about. It could be part of this recent spate of turf wars that's kicked off, and not an isolated incident.'

'Will do.'

Cummins nodded and headed off, then swivelled on his heels. 'There is one other thing.'

'Boss?'

'We have a new lad starting on Monday, his name is David Carlisle.'

'What do we know about him?'

'He's an up-and-coming bright spark according to Superintendent Smyth, and has a second-class honours degree in behavioural psychology.'

'I'm impressed.'

'Open University, I believe. He's ambitious, and the

Metropolitan's Murder Investigation Team recently selected him as a criminal psychologist. He's no mug, so he could be very useful to us.'

Mason cocked his head to one side. 'What the hell is he doing here?'

'The people upstairs are keen he gets some hands-on experience.'

'Well, there's plenty of that, for sure.'

'Good. I knew you would warm to the idea.' Cummins smiled. 'You may wish to take him under your wing for a couple of weeks—familiarise him with the Watkins investigation. Who knows, his criminal profiling skills may prove useful.'

Mason shrugged. 'I could do with an extra pair of hands, that is for sure.'

'Perfect. I'll fill you in with the details later.'

Mason stepped into his office feeling upbeat. He'd been having a rough time lately and was fast running out of ideas. The thought of another pair of willing hands to share his workload pleased him immensely. Things were on the up, and maybe he could spend a little more time at home.

He checked his day diary.

'Anything to report on last night's stabbing, Norwell?'

DC Summers lifted his head above the computer screen and frowned. 'The lad in question is called Paul Siddons, Sarge.'

'That's the first I've heard of it. Why wasn't I informed?'

'It's only just come via the front desk.'

Mason looked at Summers with a worried expression.

'Has anyone spoken to him yet?'

‘Not from the murder team, they haven’t. That said, the duty officer stated that they interviewed him in the hospital before they discharged him.’

‘Do we know what happened exactly?’

‘A group of youths attacked him over on the Clapton Park Estate.’

‘A member of a rival gang, was he?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so,’ Summers replied. ‘Siddons works as a social volunteer. He runs errands for old people and occasionally helps in the community kitchen. He was stepping out of the tower block lift when the attack took place and walked right into them. When he tried to run away, they stabbed him in the arm with a flick-knife.’

Mason felt his eyes narrow.

‘A flick-knife! That sounds very much like the individual who had a go at me.’

‘Could be,’ Summers acknowledged. ‘I know Stratford is running a stop and search operation called Santa Claus, so it might be worth calling them.’

‘People who carry flick-knives don’t sit well in my books, Norwell. We need to chase this up, and quickly.’

‘Uniforms are already on it, Sarge.’

‘Excellent!’

Mason took down the details and moved towards the long bank of filing cabinets running along the back wall of the office. The way things were going, if they didn’t act soon, they could face an even bigger problem. This latest attack had an all too familiar ring about it, and he was determined to find the underlying cause.

He opened one of the central filing cabinets and flicked

through the case folder tabs. The sergeant's instincts as a working detective over the years had slowly developed with time; he had gained a sixth sense for sniffing out rotten apples and never forgot a face. As he thumbed through dozens of case files, he found the one he was looking for.

*Operation Santa Claus.*

'Bingo!'

'Found something of interest, Sarge?' asked Summers.

'The young lad who threatened me over on the Clapton Park Estate, his name is Tony Abbott.'

'Never heard of him. I wonder if it's the same guy who set about Paul Siddons?'

'It wouldn't surprise me.'

'I'll get uniforms to pick him up, Sarge. Let's bring him in for questioning.' Summers gave Mason a look of concern. 'We can't risk a loose cannon causing trouble, he needs to be dealt with.'

Mason thought about it and quickly decided against it. What truly exposed someone's character, more than individual deeds, was the recurring sequence of their actions. He smiled at how opposed to rushing into things he was nowadays. Until he had enough evidence to lay more serious charges against Tony Abbott, that is. His plan was to catch the Southside leader at his own game. Red-handed, if possible.

Still smarting over his close encounter in the tower block lift, Mason let his mind drift. Abbott clearly had an attitude problem, an irresponsible moron with little or no respect for the law. Mason hated parasites at the best of times. Bottom feeders who thrived on attacking the weak and vulnerable and didn't give a damn how many people's lives they ruined along

the way. The moment he clapped eyes on Tony Abbott, he knew he would go into one of his red mist rages—God forbid he caught up with him in a dark alley one night.

‘Hold fire on Abbott,’ Mason insisted. ‘I have other plans for him.’

‘Like what?’ Summers said, looking curious.

‘Meet me down in the carpark in five minutes.’

‘Where are we going now, Sarge?’

‘Hackney Central tube station to check on a cash machine.’

‘And after that?’

‘My favourite stamping ground.’

‘Not the Clapton Hart pub?’ The Constable groaned. ‘The beer is as weak as piss!’

Mason lifted his eyes to the heavens. Summers was right, it was a crap pint, and they had run out of cheese and onion crisps as he remembered. The only thing going in its favour was that local gossip ran rife.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Including Jack Mason, there were seven hand-picked officers assembled close to the Lee Navigation. It was a brutally chilly night, low clouds, little light, with plenty of ground cover. Now fifty metres from their target, Mason surveyed his surroundings as he adjusted his eyes to the dark. A ton of questions needed answering, but that would come later, once Tony Abbott was in custody.

As it had done so many times in the past, intelligence gathering had finally paid dividends. This wasn't the first time the Anchor and Hope had attracted the police's attention; a raid under the cover of darkness was bound to happen. It was Abbott's favourite drinking hole, and Mason hoped to catch the Southside leader red-handed. Concerned about the sudden increase in knife crime on the estate, Mason was looking for answers. Was Tony Abbott involved? Did he stab Paul Siddons? The real problem was that you could hardly go knocking on a suspect's door as they knew you were coming. The strategy was a bluff, a carefully laid trap to make a suspect drop their guard by feigning indifference.

Tucked back in one of the many quiet side streets, a steady stream of police officers now moved into position. Dressed in their familiar black riot gear and carrying 14-inch batons, they looked a formidable force. Each homicide investigation was a piece of a puzzle; the challenge lay in assembling them. No two operations were ever the same, and all it took was a

mistake. Mason's leadership ensured that such a situation would never arise. This raid was fine-tuned, right down to the very last detail. At least they had strength in numbers, which was always a major plus in these situations.

Laughter reached Mason through the pub's taproom door, coming from the bar. There were twenty of them in total. Late teens, and some a little older. It was no surprise they picked the Anchor and Hope, known for attracting individuals who liked to flaunt themselves, this was a veritable breeding ground.

Through a gap in the door, Mason spotted Abbott. He was standing at the bar, pint in hand, and holding court. Dressed in a black hoodie, jeans, and white trainers loosely tied, the gang leader's posture oozed confidence. Mason smiled to himself. He would take him by surprise, put an end to his shenanigans, and bring some order back to the streets of Clapton. Not that he would put up much of a fight. The odds stacked against him, someone like Abbott would flee at the first sign of real trouble.

Mason chose his moment carefully, knowing they had covered all the escape routes.

'Go, go, go!' he shouted.

As dozens of police officers poured in through the tiniest of gaps in the main entrance door, spontaneous fighting broke out. Fists, arms, and legs entered the fray. Mason heard glass breaking and caught a flash of silver light. He ducked instinctively the moment he saw an arm raised. What followed was a perfectly timed boot to the crotch and the feeling of soft, sinking satisfaction. As the youth dropped to his knees, the sergeant stepped over him to get to Abbott.

Mason did not do things in half measures. It wasn't in his nature. Brought up on a tough council estate, he had learned the hard way—leading from the front. These individuals showed remarkable resilience and refused to retreat.

Just me and you now, Mason thought.

The sergeant felt the blow, then tasted blood.

Abbott was goading him, his hand moving ominously towards his knife pocket. But there was nowhere else to go, and he threw himself back into the fray. So many unanswered questions, so many things that did not add up. Before Abbott had time to react, Mason reached over and grabbed hold of his assailant's collar. It ripped, came away in his hand, and the realisation suddenly sank in.

'Nab him!' he yelled.

Shocked, Abbott ran towards the taproom door. It wasn't a positive move. As a team of angry officers gave chase, the gang leader's downfall seemed inevitable. A surly officer, Kevin Hammer by name, seemed eager to get to him.

'Over here!' the officer shouted.

Mason watched as Abbott climbed over a pile of empty beer crates leaning against a brick wall. He was heading for the yard gate and trying to evade capture.

'Stop him!' Mason yelled. 'He's getting away!'

The moment Abbott cleared the other side, he grabbed hold of the nearest stack of beer crates and pulled them over.

Everyone froze.

'*Shit!*' someone yelped.

What followed was an almighty crash, as dozens of officers scattered in all directions. The next thing they saw, looking around, was Abbott heading towards the Lee Navigation.

‘Don’t just stand there,’ Mason screamed. ‘Get after him!’

Within seconds of picking themselves up, another stack of beer crates came toppling over. Chaos reigned as officers frantically stumbled around in the dark. But Abbott was now in full flight, heading for one of the lock gates and desperately trying to evade capture.

‘There!’ Someone screamed. ‘He’s running along the towpath.’

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mason did not carry a torch, a decision he now regretted. He led half a dozen uniformed officers, sprinting along the towpath running parallel with the river, and making progress. It was ink-dark, the only light came from the occupied narrowboats moored alongside the river the distant streetlights of Upper Clapton, and the barest reflection of the moon on the water.

Cursing his misfortune, the route Tony Abbot was taking appeared to have an irreversible finality. To his left was a row of terraced cottages, to his right the river known as the Lee Navigation. As Mason sprinted towards a bend in the river, he could see a long string of narrowboats moored up, some occupied, others dark and empty. As thoughts turned to the charges he would throw at his suspect, his pace quickened. He would take Abbott by force, overpower him, and bring an end to his violent reign of terror.

Glancing round, the sergeant could see a posse of police officers trailing in his wake. He conceded his suspect was ten years younger than most of the group and that their police equipment hindered their advancement, but he still increased his stride.

With the gap narrowing, Mason swore he could hear Abbott wheezing. Was he carrying the flick-knife? Had he thrown it away? He hoped not, as it was the one piece of evidence he was looking for.

As his thoughts drifted to Brenda, their unborn child, and

the tumultuous events at the Anchor and Hope pub that evening, they veered sharply from the river Springfield Park. Bounded by trees on either side, tracks criss-crossed in all directions. This was a tough terrain for a chase. It had an ominous feel, intimidating, as if Abbott might lash out at any moment.

He heard a distant police siren in the night. Faint at first, but distinctly getting louder. To his left, the heavily built-up Clapton Common estate, to his right the Lee Navigation. As the ground in front of him opened, Mason could see dozens of flashlights heading towards him. They were moving at speed in a long, sweeping arc. He assumed it was a backup, but could not be sure.

‘You’re surrounded,’ Mason yelled at the top of his voice.

The sergeant had stopped running, his chest heaving with exertion. He turned sharply and saw PC White lumbering towards him. She carried a flashlamp in her hand, its beam rhythmically bouncing.

‘He’s hiding around the other side, Sarge,’ White called out.

‘I see him,’ another shouted.

It did not take long.

Picked out in White’s flashlight beam, Abbott was cowering in thick undergrowth. Now surrounded by dozens of angry police officers, the Southside leader looked decidedly sorry for himself.

It was over—well, not quite.

Mason approached with caution. ‘Tony Abbot, I’m arresting you on suspicion of murder. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention—’

‘Cut the crap. I’m innocent.’

‘Try telling that to a jury,’ the sergeant groaned.

At that point, Mason was unsympathetic what Abbott had to say, and paid no mind to what others thought. As he clicked the cold metal of the handcuffs onto the gang leader’s bony wrist, he resumed his search. Spinning Abbott round, he felt for the flick-knife. It remained hidden, nestled unseen within the suspect’s left trouser pocket.

‘Is this the same knife you threatened me with?’

Abbott looked at him stony-faced. ‘It’s for peeling apples.’

‘Big apples,’ Mason replied, dropping the pearl-handled knife into a plastic forensic bag. ‘Let’s hope this doesn’t have traces of Paul Siddons’ blood on it.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘He’s the guy you stabbed over on the Clapton Park estate—remember?’

‘Don’t crap me.’

‘We’ll soon see about that.’

The moment they frog marched his suspect away to a waiting police van, Mason felt relief. It was over, and he was finally back in control.

Would he talk?

Would he name the killer?

That was the crucial question on everyone’s mind.

Back inside the Anchor and Hope, the pub resembled a bomb site. Glass everywhere, overturned tables and chairs, it had been one hell of a fight. More than pleased with the way his team had handled themselves, Mason tried to relax. With most of the Southside gang now rounded up, there seemed little point in going after the stragglers. Once they compiled

the suspect list, that was their next action.

The taproom door opened, and a head appeared.

‘Another fine day at the office?’ Constable Summers grinned.

‘You could say that,’ Mason concurred.

His colleague looked at his watch.

‘There’s not a lot more we can do here, Sarge.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘Why don’t you leave it with us to clear up?’ DC Crawford said, looking decidedly pleased with himself. ‘There’s nothing we can’t handle.’

His mind all over the place, Mason pocketed his notebook. He had reports and statements to collect, but that could wait until morning. Above all, he was itching to get home and find out how Brenda’s day had gone.

Mason glanced at Crawford. ‘What about the rest of the Southside gang?’

‘It will take all night to book them in. Besides, they ain’t going anywhere fast.’

The sergeant hesitated. ‘I’ll leave you two to get on with it.’

Before leaving, Mason handed Summers Tony Abbott’s flick-knife. Thankfully, the Southside gang leader hadn’t thrown it into the navigation, as he’d considered doing. With any luck, they now had enough incriminating evidence to put Abbott behind bars for a lengthy time. While solving some crimes proved beneficial, Abbott might be innocent of Harold Watkins’ murder. Despite that, his involvement in serious knife-related crime was certain.

Mason smiled as he closed the bar door behind him and made for the unmarked police car. If he put his foot down, he

could be home in twenty-five minutes.

He took out his phone, punched in the number, and waited for the dial tone to kick in.

‘It’s me darling. I am on my way home.’

‘Not much happening tonight?’ Brenda replied.

‘No. It’s all been relatively quiet.’

‘Fine. I’ll order a takeaway.’

His phone went dead.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mason leaned forward and rested his arms on the interview table. Charged with three counts of carrying a bladed article in a public place, including stabbing Paul Siddons with intent to cause severe harm, Tony Abbott's demeanour looked strained. The Southside leader was now in deep trouble, bracing for an extended jury trial. Finally, the wall of silence at Clapton Park Estate had crumbled. Residents were talking and uncovering a bigger picture.

The instant DCI Cummins entered the interview room the suspect's posture stiffened. As another grueling round of questions began, the air crackled with tension. Even though investigators didn't find Abbott's fingerprints in Harold Watkins' flat, it did not mean he was innocent. A potential killer was in their custody, and they were driven to find the truth.

'Your mother rang,' the chief inspector began. 'She was asking after you.'

'She'd be the last person to talk to you,' Abbott retorted. 'She hates you people.'

Cummins' brow furrowed. 'Intent to cause severe injury to another individual risks a long prison sentence. Fresh evidence about the Paul Siddons attack makes things even worse.'

'Who is Siddons?'

'The young man you stabbed over on the Clapton Park Estate. Remember?'

‘Try pulling the other leg.’

The room fell silent; the atmosphere strained.

‘For the tape, I’m showing Mr Abbot exhibit B356.’

Cummins slid a monochrome image in front of Abbot. ‘On the evening of the twenty-seventh, at 20:30, witnesses observed you exiting a lift on the Clapton Park Estate, whereupon you assaulted Paul Siddons with a bladed weapon.’

‘No comment.’

‘This is your knife, is it not?’

‘No comment,’ Abbot shrugged.

‘Multiple eyewitnesses confirm your presence at Clapton Park Estate during the event.’

‘So, what! I live there.’

Cummins took a moment to consider the matter.

‘Tell me about this Southside gang you are involved in. Is it true that you are their leader?’

‘No comment.’

‘Here’s the thing,’ said Cummins, visibly annoyed. ‘We also have several witnesses who state that you were involved in a recent spate of stabbings on the estate.’

‘That’s bullshit!’

The chief inspector’s stare intensified.

‘Someone who carries a flick-knife and is not afraid to brandish it tells a lot about his character. We are not daft. You may think we are, but we are not.’

The young man shrugged, refusing to meet either officer’s eyes.

The lead detective eased back in his seat and looked hard at Abbott. ‘You will need to work with us because you are not making a convincing job of it. In fact, we now have interesting

evidence placing you near Harold Watkins' flat around the time of his murder.'

'No comment.'

'Being a gang leader is all about building a reputation and showing the other members just how tough you are. Isn't that what this is all about?'

Abbott hunched his shoulders in an aggressive pose. 'If you're trying to scare me, it ain't working.'

'No, I did not think it would. I just thought I'd mention it, that is all.'

'Fuck you.'

Cummins smiled, his words still resonating around the room. There was a cold, calculating intensity in the chief inspector's voice. He was good, extremely good, and his delivery impeccable, Mason thought.

'Let's focus on this murder charge you face.'

Abbott squirmed in his seat. He was shaking and desperately trying to hide the fact.

'Why bother? You know I did not do it.'

'Do what?'

'Beat the old geezer up.'

'Really?' Cummins replied. 'Try telling a jury that when my Sergeant informs them you tried to stab him to death whilst he was on duty.'

'Nice try,' Abbott squirmed.

Mason felt a cold shudder wash over him. The chief inspector's masterly approach had certainly got under Abbott's skin, and it was showing. What their suspect had in abundance was egotism.

'Why don't you tell me what really took place in Harold Watkins' flat that day?'

Abbott shrugged. ‘Cos.’

‘Cos, what?’

‘Cos I’ve told you all I know.’

‘What about my sergeant here? Are you saying he’s lying?’

‘It was self-defence—everyone saw him punch me.’

‘That’s not how I see it,’ said Mason, drumming the tabletop with his fingers.

‘Oh yeah? What about the other ten dudes who were there? Are you saying they are stupid too?’

‘There were six of you, actually.’

‘Don’t bullshit me—’

Cummins cut across them. ‘Do you say my sergeant is lying?’

‘I know he is, because that’s what he’s taught to do.’

‘Try telling that to a judge when I show them the CCTV footage of you pointing a knife at his throat.’

Abbott scooted his seat. ‘It’s bollocks.’

Cummins shook his head and sighed. ‘I never joke about anything involving the law, Tony. Three innocent people. All attacked in the same building and all by the same group of youths.’

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘The evidence speaks for itself. First Harold Watkins, then a police officer on duty, and now Paul Siddons.’

Abbott sank back looking decidedly deflated.

‘I need names,’ said Cummins forcefully. ‘That’s how the system runs around here. You help me, and I’ll see what I can do for you.’

‘Don’t shit me, motherfucker. I’ve told you all I know.’

‘Names, Tony. I need names.’

Cummins seemed to concentrate on the logic. He was sharp, direct, and cut through the suspect's defences with ease. He knew how to handle people caught up in awkward situations, and it was enough to put the fear of God into many a grown man.

The chief inspector, with a decisive gesture, raised a finger. 'Here's my problem. Witnesses saw you and your so-called cronies in the vicinity around the time someone broke into Harold Watkins' flat. It's what's known as indirect evidence... evidence that does not directly prove a fact in dispute but allows a jury to draw a reasonable inference that puts you close to the crime scene. Your biggest concern right now is that we have enough evidence to put you inside Harold Watkins' property at the time of the attack.'

'You are full of shit. That's impossible.'

'Well,' said Cummins leaning back in his chair and linking his hands behind his head with a calculating coldness. 'Like I say, we are not daft. That's why we are currently searching your mother's property.'

Abbott shook his head in disbelief.

'Don't mess with me.'

'It's what we do best, Tony. While you're banged up in a police cell with shelter and three meals daily, we cannot simply wait for you to reconsider.'

Abbott's words were sharp and forceful, laced with anger. 'This is crazy shit. Tell me you're joking.'

'It's not a game. Far from it. It's a fact.'

'Screw you. You're bluffing.'

Having spoken little throughout, Abbott's solicitor leaned over and said, 'You have no evidence to link my client to any

crime—cannot prove he was inside the victim’s flat, nor that he assaulted Paul Siddons. In fact, the only thing you seem to have is that he carried a knife.’

Mason shot Abbott a withering glance. ‘The trouble is yours is the only name in the frame. So, if you cannot provide a better explanation for Harold Watkins’ murder, we will hold you responsible.’

Abbott, burdened by his guilt, fought back against every push.

‘You heard my brief,’ the gang leader said with an insulting smirk. ‘You ain’t got nothing on me.’

Cummins pushed his chair back and stood to his feet. Hands in pockets, head hunched slightly forward, he glowered at Abbott. ‘I cannot see any point in us continuing. So, unless you have something of interest to tell us, I am ending the interview.’

Abbott glared at Cummins, and for a moment Mason thought he was going to kick off. He did not. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, linked his hands behind his head, and laughed. ‘You’re bullshitting me—’

‘It’s not a game, Tony,’ Mason interrupted.

Abbott struggled to get his words out. ‘Don’t crap me. You know it wasn’t me.’

Mason leaned in closer. ‘Okay. The day I met you in the service lift, where had you been?’

Abbott paused so long before answering that Mason thought he’d not understood the question. ‘We were up on the roof—we hang out there.’

The suspect’s voice sounded monotone, disconnected, as if forcing his words.

‘And what were you doing there?’

Abbott laughed out brashly. ‘Looking for a rumble.’

‘A fight?’

‘Yeah. We have a clear view of everything.’

‘Eyes in the sky, eh.’ Cummins smiled. ‘Tell me, what *did* you see that day?’

‘Not a lot.’

‘What do you mean... not a lot?’

‘We saw dozens of cherries and berries arriving and got out of it.’ Abbott paused in thought. ‘That’s when we met your sergeant here.’

Cummins scowled. ‘So, why threaten him with a knife?’

‘He threw me a punch, remember.’

Mason felt a cold shudder run down his spine. Wrong place, right time, he suspected. At least Abbott was talking, which was more than they had bargained for. Perhaps they’d been harsh on him. If he were telling the truth, what then? They would need a fresh approach. Something more concrete. Who else was nearby when someone broke into the old man’s flat?

Cummins leaned forward in his seat.

‘Let’s talk about this rooftop viewing point. How many of you were up there?’

‘Don’t remember.’

Abbott’s answer was vague, and Cummins had noticed it. ‘Someone broke into Harold Watkins’ flat, and we suspect it was you.’

‘Jesus. You ain’t been listening to me.’

‘Why can’t it be you? You know an awful lot about what is going on in the estate.’

‘I ain’t the fucking Thames House.’

‘And yet you conveniently missed my sergeant’s arrival on the scene.’

Mason bit his lip as he wrote something down.

‘I tell you what,’ said Abbott, looking decidedly annoyed. ‘If I had beaten the shit out of the old geezer like you said I did, then everyone on the estate would have known about it.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Abbott spoke to his solicitor again, who turned to face them. ‘It’s known as street credibility, Chief Inspector.’

‘Ah, yes. Street cred! I’d almost forgotten about that.’

‘It’s how others judge you.’

‘I know. Try telling that to dozens of mothers who have lost their sons caught up in knife crime over the years.’

Cummins eyed Abbott up, leaned over, and switched the interview recording tape off.

‘If you claim to be the eyes and ears of the estate, then surely you must have a few names in mind?’

‘It ain’t that simple, and you know it.’

‘So, we’re back to this street credibility thing again?’

‘Yeah, right first time for once.’

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mason peered over the rooftop balcony at Ambergate Court and felt an icy blast of air in his face. Twenty stories up, with commanding views overlooking the whole of Clapton Park Estate, there was little wonder Tony Abbott had chosen this vantage point. But the city had changed so much, even in Mason's brief lifetime. He could remember, as a child, when streets like these were safe to play in. Not anymore. People had carved up estates into various, bitter, postcode rivalries, and child criminal exploitation had become the new growing buzzword. It wasn't good, and the younger gang members, between the ages of twelve and sixteen, were becoming increasingly active in street crime.

He watched as another forensic van joined the cluster of parked police cars. There was still plenty of activity on the estate even though things had quietened down a tad.

'Thinking of throwing yourself off?' said David Carlisle as he strode to join him.

Mason smiled. 'Pushing someone over, more like.'

'Did Bob Cummins say anything to you about me sitting in on the next Abbott interview?'

'Yes, he did.'

'What are your thoughts?'

'Anything's worth a try.' Mason replied.

Having gone back over the Abbott interview transcripts, Carlisle's criminal profiling skills offered another dimension to

their investigations. Cummins was keen on the idea, and Mason was happy to string along if it meant progress.

‘What’s your take on it?’ asked Carlisle.

‘We need to establish what the North Boys’ leader is up to,’ Mason said, turning to face the profiler. ‘There’s a rabbit off somewhere, and I can’t put my finger on it.’

‘What do we know about him?’

‘Brian Fagan, aka Zelly, previously lived with an aunt in Peckham. He excelled at school and was doing well for himself. Three years ago, he dropped off the radar and ended up here on the estate. Residents dislike him, and he has earned a fearful reputation among them.

‘So, why Clapton Park of all places? What’s the attraction?’

‘He was mixing with the wrong crowd—running errands for a big-time crook who had taken a shine to him. One thing for sure, he is one step ahead of the game and knows how to play the system.’

Carlisle dug his hands in his pockets and shrugged. ‘I got the impression the Southside leader thinks Zelly’s a bit of an idiot.’

Mason grinned. ‘Zelly’s not daft, he just comes across that way.’

‘Interesting,’ Carlisle replied.

‘I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.’

‘Fools think they’re brilliant, but clever people often doubt their own intelligence.’

‘Zelly’s smart all right, he’s not the idiot that some people make him out to be.’

‘Could someone be pulling Zelly’s strings?’ Carlisle quizzed.

‘It’s possible. But who is the question?’

‘The man obviously has ambitions, hence his fearless reputation.’

Mason shook his head in despair. ‘Zelly controls a group of young thugs known as the North Boys. Hooligans. Young offenders who do not give a damn about the local community. These people are a real nuisance, but the core problem is that the two rival factions are in perpetual conflict. Drugs and disputes over territorial rights.’

‘Turf wars,’ Carlisle remarked. ‘So, Zelly runs the north side of the estate and Abbott the south side.’

‘In a nutshell, yes.’

‘So, why does Abbott despise Zelly? Is he the more dominant figure?’

‘The hatred between them runs deep,’ Mason explained. ‘They are in a power struggle, both seeking to dominate the other’s territory.’

‘It doesn’t sound good.’

‘No,’ Mason shrugged. ‘Maybe there’s a darker side to all of this, one that has yet to surface.’

Carlisle acknowledged with a shake of the head. ‘What’s Tony Abbott’s background? What do we know about him?’

‘The man has a serious hatred towards authority in any form. In and out of prison from the age of ten, his major offences include drugs, housebreaking, GBH, and car theft or twoccing, as it is better known. He is not the friendliest person to deal with and has recently developed a propensity towards serious knife crime.’

‘An ideal candidate for murder, it would seem.’

‘I’m not convinced about that, but he has a violent streak. I can certainly vouch for that. A few weeks back, he raised a

fist at me and came close to succeeding might I add.’ Mason gathered his thoughts. ‘Mind, I don’t think he was involved in the Watkins murder, it’s not his style. Abbott is only interested in his street image. It’s a reputation thing, and knife crime fits his cause perfectly.’

‘What about firearms, is he known to have used them?’

‘Not that I’m aware of.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Carlisle. ‘The clash between the two warring gang leaders is a dangerous omen for any hope of a peaceful estate.’

Mason blew through his teeth. ‘Tell me about it.’

‘How does Abbott come across during interviews?’

‘He’s difficult to weigh up if I’m honest, as he constantly blows hot and cold.’ Mason shrugged. ‘He causes a lot of trouble and belongs in prison.’

‘Sounds like we have a real problem on our hands.’

Mason disliked good guy-bad guy interviews. He had used them before to no effect. Abbott was a slippery customer who would turn on a sixpence if he thought he could get away with it. Having threatened Abbott with a lengthy prison sentence if he refused to talk, Mason was hoping it would play on the gang leader’s mind. Sometimes psychology worked, other times not. It was a fine balancing act, and you never knew which way the wind would blow. Unlike a thief who could offer restitution, the irreversible act of murder left no path to compensation. It was final and always left a nasty taste in the mouth.

‘Gaining Abbott’s trust is paramount,’ Carlisle mused, his brow furrowed in thought.

‘What if he turns inwards on you? What then?’

‘I’ve studied the transcripts, and he already has.’

‘How did you work that one out?’

‘Entering an interview room assuming guilt means you are only listening to certain parts of the evidence. It’s selective hearing and ignores the things that do not fit your script.’

Mason shook his head feebly. ‘You have obviously done your homework, but I do not share your views, unfortunately. What I can tell you is, we’ve gone over Abbott’s bedroom with a fine-tooth comb and nothing of interest has shown up.’ Mason swung sharply to face Carlisle. ‘If Abbott isn’t responsible for Harold Watkins’ murder, he may know someone who is.’

‘Threatening him will get you nowhere, you have already established that. The problem is, the harder you try the more he will resist you.’

Mason ran his fingers through his short-cropped hair. ‘I’m not trying to force the bastard into making a confession, for God’s sake. Abbott is holding back on something. I’m convinced of that.’

‘Forcing him to talk will never work.’ Carlisle looked hard at him. ‘If he wears his criminal record pinned to his chest like a badge of honour, he’ll resist you all the way.’

‘How do you intend to approach the interview?’

‘Thugs like Abbott see themselves as role models—they have deluded opinions about how society sees them. It’s all about respect, making them feel important. That’s how you get them to talk.’

‘What Abbott needs is a size nine boot up the backside.’

‘True, but conflict will only enhance his reputation.’

‘Tell me,’ Mason said, spinning on his heels. ‘How do you

propose to break the cycle if Abbott refuses to cooperate?’

‘In the wider personality structure, his persona plays a vital role in the complexities of motivation. On the surface, Abbott portrays himself as the hard man, but beneath the veneer I suspect lies a less confident personality.’

Mason laughed. ‘I’m not so sure about that.’

Carlisle cocked his head to one side in thought. ‘The question you should ask yourself is, which side of the fence is Abbott sitting on? Is this a power struggle, or is he trying to protect himself from something?’

‘Or someone,’ Mason cut in.

‘And we know he’d dearly love to take control of Zelly’s Northside.’

Mason grinned. ‘What influence does the North Boys’ leader have?’

‘A lot, I’d wager.’

Mason had never worked with a criminal profiler before, and offender profiling was a subject he knew nothing about. Despite the lack of scientific research, profiling was a valued tool in US law enforcement agencies. Carlisle’s method intrigued him, particularly the concept of linkage analysing. He might not be sure about the science behind it, but Mason did not give a damn if it meant it uncovered Watkins’ killer.

Two hundred feet below, another marked patrol car drove off the forecourt. There was still a lot of police activity in the area, and they were certainly making their presence felt. As they moved towards the service lift together, Mason wished he shared the profiler’s enthusiasm. Abbott would be a hard nut to crack, no doubting that. If DCI Cummins could not get him to talk, could a criminal profiler succeed?

Anything was possible.

The lift stank of disinfectant and vomit. Nothing ever changed, Mason groaned. He pressed the descent button and watched as the green digital display counted the floor levels down. Strangely enough, Carlisle seemed confidently upbeat about his impending interview with Abbott, even though the two had never met. Mason just hoped Abbott's solicitor would have warned his client against going "no-comment" on them. Murder interviews were strange affairs at the best of times, as you never knew how the suspect would react. Bluffing was key to many a winning hand, and cross-examination felt like a game of poker. Tomorrow was another day, and he would need to keep an open mind about the outcome.

As Mason and Carlisle drove out of the forecourt and past security, the first spots of rain hit the car's windscreen. It was cold enough for snow, but thankfully a jet stream was blowing warmer air in from the south of France and pushing everything north. Eager to get back to his office, Mason still had a mountain of paperwork to climb. Not that he was looking forward to it. He wasn't.

Although most of the Southside members were facing an uncertain future, the sergeant hoped that one of them might talk. Pressure got to people, made them nervous, and forced them to say things. Having lived on these streets for years, he had an intimate understanding of how criminals behaved. For him, the solution was perfectly clear.

*They were scumbags, every single one of them!*

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jack Mason felt Carlisle's interview with Tony Abbott would fail from the onset. Highly intelligent, the profiler had a sharp, retentive mind, but his delivery was far too measured and seldom kept to the script. Nothing wrong with that, but time was a luxury, and you had to use it sparingly. Despite their contrasting approaches to Harold Watkins' murder, Mason felt assured that Abbott's contribution would be minimal.

It was a tense standoff, and as Carlisle showed Abbott several CCTV image stills, their suspect drew back.

'Do you know this man, Mr Abbott?'

The gang leader shrugged, and Mason tried not to scowl. It was clear the profiler would have to employ more persistent and unconventional methods to glean any useful details.

'No comment.'

'When I was your age, I feared the bad guys. It gets no easier. You are always terrified that someone will see through the brave facade, right?' Carlisle smiled warmly as he eased back in his seat. 'It's a confidence thing, something that sticks in your mind and triggers the nightmares.'

Abbott's eyes were all over the place.

'What are you talking about?'

'I know fear when I see it, Tony.'

'I'm not scared of shit.'

'I know.' The profiler leaned forward, both elbows on the table. 'I was looking through a photograph album we found in

your bedside cabinet the other day. There was a picture of you and your father in it. You were walking along a beach together and looking at sailing ships. Much happier times, I suspect—a long time ago. Tell me, what kind of man was your father?’

‘What has my father got to do with this?’

Abbott was fighting his demons, unsure of which way to turn. Hands clasped on the table in front of him, he seemed ill at ease, Mason thought.

‘I know how it is,’ Carlisle continued calmly. ‘Without a father’s support, it is always difficult to seek advice when you need it most. Tell me. Why is Zelly such a threat to you?’

Mason thought he caught a faint flicker, a subtle sign that Carlisle was on to something.

‘Zelly don’t scare me.’

‘Of course not. But there is a reason for your nightmares. I get it. I have them too. I am terrified that they will find out I’m faking all of this. That I’m an imposter and they break down the mental barriers.’

Mason could not tell if Carlisle’s smile was for him or Abbott.

‘Bullshit. You know nothing about me,’ the Southside leader glowered.

‘Do you think you can handle it?’

‘Who said I couldn’t?’

‘What about the North Boys, do they give you grief?’

Abbott hesitated before answering.

‘I’m not scared of shit.’

‘That’s the second time you’ve said that.’ Mason cut in.

Carlisle pointed down at the images again. ‘This man at the cash machine. He is one of Zelly’s gang members, isn’t he?’

‘Never seen him before.’

Mason leaned forward and tapped a finger on the metal tabletop. ‘You are still under caution, Abbott. And why are you protecting him? Does Zelly have something on you, or is this a loyalty thing between fellow gang leaders?’

‘You ain’t listening,’ Abbott snarled.

‘How could someone get hold of the credit card?’ asked Mason. ‘Did they steal it from a defenceless old man? Is that how Zelly runs his gang—picking on the vulnerable?’

Abbott shrugged, but said nothing.

‘You must stop fighting it,’ Carlisle uttered. ‘You’re much better than Zelly.’

‘You know nothing about what I’m thinking.’

‘Actually, I do. And that worries me.’

‘You saying you can read my mind?’

‘I know I can.’

‘It’s bollocks!’

The profiler gestured to the image again. He was playing with Abbott’s mind, trying to unsettle him and get inside the gang leader’s head. It was a clever ruse.

‘Something is bothering you, and whatever it is, you need to let it go. If not, it will spark off all kinds of weird and wonderful emotions inside your head.’

‘Oh, really?’

‘I’ve seen it play out before, and the ending is not a positive one.’

Abbott looked at Carlisle hard. ‘The moment I tell you dumb dicks anything, you’ll use it against me.’

Mason waved a finger at Abbott. ‘Not this time. It could work to your benefit.’

‘It’s all talk.’

‘Tell me about Zelly,’ said Carlisle softly. ‘Why do you despise him?’

Abbott’s solicitor leaned over and interrupted them. ‘May I have a moment to speak with my client?’

‘Go ahead,’ Mason said, as he switched off the interview tape. ‘Take your time, you’ve got plenty of that on your hands.’

Suddenly, the opportunity for plea bargaining became more obvious, as if their suspect was ready to confess. No sooner had the two detectives left the interview room, they were called back again.

‘My client wishes to make a statement,’ Abbott’s solicitor announced.

‘About what?’

He held up a hand in his client’s defence. ‘I need assurances that certain charges are to be dropped.’

‘Which charges are these?’ Mason asked.

‘Those involving Harold Watkins’ murder.’

The sergeant’s mind went blank, as if a hack had scrambled his brain. Smiling at them, trying to think of something that would sound positive, he reached for his notes. Something seemed wrong. Abbott’s solicitor, who had said little throughout, had seized the initiative. What was he involved in, and why?

Pen poised, Mason stared hard at Abbott’s solicitor. ‘It depends on what your client is about to tell us, of course. Off the record, I presume we are talking joint enterprise here?’

‘I can assure you my client had nothing to do with Harold Watkins’ death, but he may have some important information that may be of major interest you.’

‘I’m all ears,’ Mason grinned. ‘I take it your client was

near Harold Watkins' flat at the time the attack took place?'

'No, he wasn't.'

'In that case, let's hear what he has to say for himself.'

Abbott squirmed in his seat as the sergeant switched on the interview tape. It was all about trust, and there was little of that in the room. The tension was mounting, and everyone was on tenterhooks.

'Okay. Take your time. Tell us what you know.'

Abbott's solicitor drew in a long intake of air and scooted his seat. 'It's my understanding that Brian Fagan, aka Zelly, has a half-brother called John Martin who lives on a narrowboat called *Kingfisher*. Travelling the length and breadth of the Lee Navigation, Martin is heavily involved in the trafficking of illegal drugs coming out of London Docks.'

Mason looked at Carlisle, then at Abbott. 'Is this true, Tony?'

Abbott shrugged. 'Yeah. Zelly and his half-bruv are in it together.'

'Are they dealers?'

'Sure. That's how most of the 'H' hits the estate.'

Mason took stock. Unfortunately, John Martin's name did not flag up any immediate concerns. What was of interest, though, was a possible new link to Harold Watkins' murder. Was Abbott telling the truth? Or was he trying to pull the wool over their eyes to get one over his arch-rival?

'I'm missing something here,' said Mason, fidgeting awkwardly. 'If you had nothing to do with Harold Watkins' murder, then who did?'

'Zelly and his half-bruv Martin.'

'Really? What makes you say that?'

Abbot laughed. 'I knew Zelly was flooding the estate with drugs. Shit was everywhere and nobody was buying. That's when I found out who was supplying him.'

'Okay,' Mason said, scratching his head. 'So how do you know they were involved in a murder?'

'We were out steaming the estate one night, me and the boys. It was ten o'clock, and we bumped into one of Zelly's runners.'

'What happened?'

The gang leader glared at Mason, then inclined his head towards Carlisle. 'He was bang out of order. Wrong place, right time.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Mason.

'The little shit wasn't carrying.'

Mason found Abbott's descriptive narration amusing.

'Are you saying Zelly's pusher had no drugs on him?'

'Yeah. He was clean.'

His suspect ran the flat of his hand over his head. He was eager to tell them more, and Mason was keen for him to continue.

'Tell me about the runner. What happened next?'

When I asked him what he was doing on our block, he said he was about to make a plastic score.'

'You mean pay for drugs with a credit card?'

'Yeah, man.'

'Whose credit card?' asked Mason.

'He claimed it was Zelly's.'

'And was it?'

'Nah. Zelly's dumb. He cannot handle plastic. We realized then that someone had nicked it.'

Clever, Carlisle mused. 'So, whose card was it?'

There was another long pause between them, a coming together of minds.

'Me thinks it was the old geezer whom someone iced.'

'What? Harold Watkins?'

'Summat like that.'

Carlisle pushed the images across the table towards Abbott.

'Was this the man who was making the withdrawal?'

'Could be,' Abbott shrugged. 'It's difficult innit.'

'How's that?'

'He's wearing a hoodie.'

'What else can you tell me?' Mason asked.

'That's all I know.'

Abbott clearly had attitude, but his story made sense. Mason leaned over and switched off the interview tape. The story felt believable, even down to the credit card withdrawal.

He turned to Abbott's solicitor.

'Let's hope your client's story rings true.'

'It's true sergeant. I can assure you of that.'

Mason smiled. 'We understand each other perfectly.'

'Indeed, we do,' Abbott's solicitor nodded.

They had made progress, despite not striking any agreements. No doubt Abbot's solicitor would press the matter, but he deal with that another time.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mason squinted in the morning light. A cold mist hung over the navigation, blurring the long string of narrowboats. Not used to being up this early, he hadn't slept a wink. Hands in pockets, head bend slightly forward, he sucked in the air and stared south to the single lock known as Alfie's Lock. He could see a team of police officers making steady progress along a narrow towpath towards the William Girling Reservoir. Following in their wake, a small "snatch and grab" party was struggling to keep up. Two officers lugged heavy battering rams slung low across their chests, one a coil of rope, and three carried circular riot shields.

Then, through the swirling dawn haze, Mason spotted *Kingfisher*. Tied to securing rings and facing north, she was clearly in need of some restoration. The river was narrow here, but no one, not even Mason, knew if John Martin was on board the narrowboat. Speculation ran rampant, but nothing was definite. A decision had to be made, and the sergeant was determined to apprehend his suspect.

Further north, beyond a bend in the river, another police unit sat hugging the tree line, awaiting the order to move in if required.

'How's it looking?'

Mason turned as DCI Cummins strode to join him.

'Any minute now, Boss.'

'She looks deserted.'

‘There’s been a hard frost,’ the sergeant replied reassuringly. ‘Martin may have battened down the hatches to stay warm.’

‘Let’s hope you’re right.’

There was so much resting on this operation, so much at stake.

Mason held the lapels of his overcoat over his throat as he gazed at *Kingfisher*. Sat low in the waterline, there were only two routes their suspect could take—the front and aft galley doors. They would ram both simultaneously. And if Martin carried a gun, armed officers would deal with it. But he wasn’t a shooter according to intelligence, just a nasty felon who prayed on the vulnerable.

Of all the people he was itching to get his hands on, it was John Martin. The man was a social parasite who didn’t give a damn how many people’s lives he destroyed. Drug trafficking was a lucrative business, and that’s all that mattered to him. Not all would be plain sailing, but the sergeant was confident that he had covered most of the groundwork, though he still had a few operational hurdles to overcome. It was down to Lady Luck.

The river was silent. The only sound was creaking mooring ropes.

‘*All units standby*—’ the call came over the airwaves.

Mason gave the signal.

‘Go! Go!’ the lead officer shouted.

The moment the narrowboat doors burst inwards with a bang, both teams rushed forward with a sense of urgency. Mason could hear glass breaking, followed by shouting, but could see nothing. As the snatch team swept through the narrowboat’s living quarters, the racket they made was deafening. Unwelcome noise confused people, disoriented

their sense of judgment, and caused them to panic without realizing.

A group of officers peered out from the narrowboat's bow door. One of them shook his head. Martin was nowhere to be seen.

*'Damn,'* Mason cursed under his breath.

The sergeant clambered onboard, closely followed by DCI Cummins. The stench that hit them—like rotten cabbages—was unbearable. Whoever lived here had no regard for hygiene, let alone any sense of order. The place was a tip. Clothes strewn everywhere, a sink piled high with dirty dishes, and every inch of the floor knee-deep in empty food containers.

*'Touch nothing,'* Cummins instructed.

*'No prospect of that happening. The place isn't fit for pigs.'*

*'Which means he may not be far away—'*

*'Crikey! Who'd want to live in this dump?'*

The chief inspector's eyes narrowed. *'You need to get forensics down here, and quick.'*

Still retching from the unbearable stench, Mason tried the light switch. It did not work. He slid the curtains back and allowed light to flood in through a porthole. After a few seconds, a voice crackled over the radio waves.

Mason identified himself and gave out instructions.

*'What's happening?'* asked Cummins.

*'It's Jim Brown, the police photographer, Boss. He's on his way.'*

*'Good. The quicker, the better.'*

It had all sounded so simple on paper, but nothing was ever straightforward during live operations. Get it wrong, and you were nobody's friend, least of all the chief inspector's. This was

Mason's first genuine opportunity to impress, a chance to make a real difference. He acknowledged his errors, accepting responsibility as his sole concern. It was all part of the learning curve, and he was learning fast.

The sergeant pointed to a short wooden shaft propped against the galley wall.

'What do you think this is, Boss?'

'It's a tiller handle used to steer the narrowboat.'

'Better not touch it. Who knows, it could be a potential murder weapon.'

Cummins nodded. 'It needs to be fast-tracked through the system.'

'I'll get forensics involved.'

'Smart idea.'

Mason caught movement through the porthole window.

'Someone is watching us.'

'I spotted him earlier,' Cummins replied, unconcerned.

The chief inspector moved back from the window, the sound of his footsteps echoing like the ring of a drum. Having never worked in the field with Bob Cummins before, the sergeant found himself truly impressed by his expertise. Incredibly relaxed, nothing escaped his attention.

'What the hell's he up to?'

'The minute we challenge him, he'll be gone.'

'Should we not get the dog teams involved?'

Cummins shook his head as he climbed the narrowboat steps. 'No. He could be a curious onlooker, who knows. Once forensics has completed a sweep of the area, we can post a couple of sentries down here.'

'I doubt Martin will return.'

'If he has any sense, he won't. Then again, who knows

what lies hidden inside *Kingfisher*.’

Stepping onto dry land, Mason’s nerves were on edge. Twenty minutes earlier this had been such a peaceful location; not anymore. It was strange how some operations could suddenly escalate beyond imagination. One minute everything was under control, the next it was up in the air.

‘I’ll leave you to get on with it,’ Cummins said, heading off along the towpath towards the lockkeeper’s house. ‘Let me know how you get on.’

‘Will do, Boss.’

As far as the eye could see, police officers were scouring the riverbanks in search of clues. Soon, the hunt for John Martin would lead police to take apart every dwelling and outbuilding along the Lee Navigation. Nowhere would be safe anymore, no matter where he ran.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Now gathered in Meeting Room One, there was still no feedback as to John Martin's whereabouts. It was half-past six in the evening, and most of the team had spent the best part of the day chasing shadows. News travelled fast, and all the national media channels were running the Lee Navigation incident. It did not take long, and once reporters got their teeth into a story word soon got around.

Mason took out his notebook and pen as Cummins addressed the assembled team.

'Okay,' the chief inspector said, waiting for the noise levels to die down. 'After a thorough search of the River Lee Navigation, uniforms found nothing. There is some better news. Water board authorities spotted a male suspect close to *Kingfisher* shortly before our arrival on the scene. Last seen heading towards the A12 and Stratford, who was he?'

PC White raised a hand to speak, and Cummins acknowledged her. 'Yes, Sheila?'

'Do we have a description, Boss?'

'Around five-ten, wearing a black hoodie and tracksuit bottoms. He was carrying a large grip bag in his hand and seemed in a hurry.'

'Not a lot to go on.'

'I agree, but you might ask yourself what he was doing there at four in the morning?'

The chief inspector perched on the edge of a table and

peered over the top of a pair of half-frame glasses. Wearing a smart pin-striped suit, white shirt, and brogue shoes, someone clearly summoned him to an afternoon progress update. Not that anyone took much notice, as most junior officers kept well clear of such meetings for fear of getting sucked in. This was the first team briefing concerning the navigation incident, and MR1 was full. It was a large turnout, and everyone was eager to be involved.

In the front row sat DCs Summers, Jones, and Crawford, with two female undercover officers who had worked on the Ambergate Court operations positioned behind them. Sitting directly opposite PC White was Colin Burton from forensics, along with a tall officer Mason knew from Road Traffic. He'd had several run-ins with him in the past. Nothing serious, but the officer would not think twice about handing you a speeding ticket if he thought you had exceeded the limit. Even when driving a police car.

Close to the door with her back to the wall, he recognised the Crime Scene Manager, Pam Godwin. The officer, meticulously dressed in comfortable trousers, a blue blouse, and matching shoes, brought an unparalleled eye for detail to her crime scene oversight. Considered by many to be the up-and-coming star on the team, she had spent the past six months working alongside Special Branch on a child trafficking operation.

Peering around, it was then that Mason spotted David Carlisle. Notebook in hand, the profiler was deep in conversation with Ted Andrews, one of the many seasoned veterans in attendance that afternoon. Whatever their debate concerned, he remained unaware, though the dialog seemed intense.

‘Okay,’ said DCI Cummins, drawing everyone’s attention back to the evidence board. ‘How long has *Kingfisher* stayed moored in her current location?’

DC Jones raised a hand to speak. ‘Someone spotted her at Rammey Marsh lock about a week ago.’

Cummins’ deep brown eyes narrowed a fraction. ‘We need to pull a timeline together of Martin’s last known sightings. Who saw what, where, and when?’

‘What about forensics, Boss?’ asked DC Crawford. ‘Anything of interest shown up?’

‘We’re still working on it,’ said Colin Burton, the senior forensic officer present. ‘There is a huge amount of evidence to sift through, let alone taking a fifty-foot narrowboat apart.’

‘What are the chances of fast-tracking some of the more important evidence through the lab?’ Mason asked.

‘It’s already in hand, Sarge. Apart from a large suitcase found stuffed inside the narrowboat’s engine compartment with Harold Watkins’ fingerprints all over it, we have since discovered a few bags of white powder. The lab team is currently testing them.’

‘Interesting,’ said Cummins. ‘What was in the suitcase?’

‘Household items, mostly. Electrical goods, cameras, an old wall clock—’

‘What about a gold watch?’

‘No, nothing of that nature.’

Cummins paused briefly, appearing to be lost in thought. ‘This testing that forensics are carrying out, any idea of time?’

‘We’re hoping to have our first results within the next couple of hours.’ Burton’s frown lines tightened. ‘What is of significant interest, though, is that we are currently examining a murder weapon. We know our suspect wore rubber gloves

during the attack, but we are hoping to find minute traces of the victim's blood on them.'

'Is this the narrowboat tiller handle we found on *Kingfisher*?' asked Cummins.

'Yes. It is.'

'Good. Let's hope you find a match.'

Almost home and dry, Mason thought as he jotted "potential murder weapon" down in his notebook. Next, he stared at the waterways map for some moments and tried to take in the bigger picture. From what he could see, the Lee Navigation ran from rural Hertfordshire to the River Thames and the heart of London. It was a picturesque and unbroken landscape with a cycling route running the entire length of the navigation. Looking at the detail, its meandering course made it a perfect environment for slipping in and out of society unnoticed. He made a mental check and closed his notebook. If forensics could prove beyond all reasonable doubt, the tiller handle was the murder weapon, it would make life a lot easier. But that wasn't all. If the artefacts inside the suitcase bore Harold Watkins' fingerprints, the case against John Martin was strengthening.

'What else do we know about Martin?' asked Cummins.

David Carlisle was quick to react. 'I've been doing some digging around, going back over old records involving road traffic offences. Ten months ago, John Martin received three minor driving convictions from the Sussex Police. Speeding fines mainly—nothing serious. What is of significant interest, though, is when I tried to delve back in time, Terrence Lovett's name kept popping up.'

Cummins' grin broadened. 'Has Martin changed his name by any chance?'

‘It would appear so.’

‘That is interesting. What else have you uncovered?’

‘After Terrence Lovett’s release from Wandsworth prison, he changed his name by deed poll. Why he chose the name John Martin, I have absolutely no idea, but he obviously had reason to—’

‘So that’s how he sneaked under the radar!’ Mason interrupted.

Everyone sat stunned at the sergeant’s sudden outburst.

Cummins’ face twitched with expectation.

‘We’ve obviously been looking in all the wrong places, it would appear.’

‘If it’s the same Terrence Lovett, then too damn right we have,’ the sergeant replied.

‘Perhaps you could enlighten us,’ said Cummins.

Above all, the sergeant was keen to get his point across. Shaking with anticipation he turned to face the assembled team. ‘Terrence Lovett was a well-known wheeler and dealer, a man not to be trusted. Known throughout the West End as Mr Shifter, Lovett’s main forte was selling stolen antiques to dodgy overseas clients. Back in the mid-eighties, he posed as a small-time antiques dealer in Portobello Road. Nothing flash, just your ordinary run-of-the-mill stuff you can pick up in any flea market. It’s what went on in the back room that majorly interested the police. That’s where the expensive stuff changed hands, and all of it stolen to order.’

‘How much are we talking about here?’

‘When we finally caught up with Lovett, the authorities charged him with the theft of antiques worth over a million pounds and sentenced him to twenty years in prison.’

Gasps all round.

‘So, Martin has previous?’

Mason laughed. ‘The moment David mentioned Terrence Lovett’s name, alarm bells were ringing in my head.’

The chief inspector smiled and then looked at Carlisle. ‘Well done. We will make a detective out of you yet, young man.’

‘One day,’ Mason jested.

Titters of laughter broke out.

‘What else can you tell us about Terrence Lovett?’ Cummins asked Mason.

As it all came flooding back, the sergeant scratched his head, thinking. ‘During the late eighties, Lovett was involved in a string of high-end antique robberies in the West End of London. Works of art. Rembrandts, Turners, Constables, you name it they were all in the mix.’ Mason shuffled awkwardly. ‘Rumors widely circulated that Lovett had dealings with the Noonan crime family, though we never found concrete proof.’

‘Why did no one ever pick him up and charge him with the offences?’

‘They certainly charged him, but that is my point. When the police raided his house, they found nothing. They had stashed all of it away, which led to Lovett’s nickname, Mister Shifter.’

The room fell silent, and you could have heard a pin drop.

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Cummins, thinking aloud. ‘If they gave Martin a twenty-year sentence back in the late eighties, how come he’s out of prison so soon?’

‘Bent barristers, Boss. The East End is full of them.’

‘You’ve obviously had previous dealings with Mr Lovett,’ said Cummins, shaking his head. ‘What was your actual involvement in the case?’

‘I wasn’t involved,’ Mason confessed. ‘This all kicked off long before I joined the police force. It was station gossip, canteen talk. The last I heard, Lovett had fallen on hard times and was dabbling in car boot sales and small-time auctions in and around the Croydon area. Nobody would touch him after he came out of prison, and who could blame them?’

‘That would make sense,’ Cummins said, turning to point at the crime board. ‘Having given up on the antiques trade, Martin has since turned his hand to drugs.’

It took a few moments for the realization to fully sink in.

‘What about Martin’s half-brother, Brian Fagan?’ asked DC Herrington. ‘Has he said anything to us yet?’

‘He hasn’t spoken since they brought him in for questioning.’

‘The last I heard he was refusing to cooperate,’ another added.

Ted Andrews was the longest-standing member of the team. Tall, with swept back white hair and long sideburns, he reminded Mason of a barrister’s clerk he once knew. Polite and reserved, he genuinely liked the man. Not ambitious like some, Andrews was a plodder more than a go-getter. That said, if ever there was a person who could uncover John Martin’s whereabouts, it was Ted Andrews.

Colin Burton, the senior forensic officer, raised his hand to speak.

‘Yes, Colin,’ Cummins acknowledged.

‘A quick update, if I may. Apart from our first drug find, a recent search of Zelly’s house uncovered a grip bag hidden beneath the bathroom floorboards. In the bag was a gun, rounds of ammunition, a quantity of cocaine and over four-thousand pounds in cash.’

Cummins exhaled through clenched teeth. ‘Little wonder

he's refusing to cooperate.'

'What about this grip bag that the suspect was carrying earlier today?'

'That's true,' Burton agreed, 'but the person seen heading toward the A12 and Stratford was lugging a substantial bag, closer to a duffel.'

'The evidence must point to one of them being involved in Watkins' murder,' said Andrews thoughtfully, 'which one is the question?'

Carlisle screwed his face up as if something were niggling him.

'Martin's modus operandi certainly fits. A ducker and diver by nature, he is someone who doesn't stay in one place too long. A narrowboat fits in with his lifestyle perfectly, as it gives him the freedom to move around unnoticed.' Carlisle cupped a mug of coffee in thought. 'Martin is a loner by nature and will resist mixing with people. Hence his change of name.'

'What about his half-brother, Zelly? Is there a strong family bond between them?'

'I wouldn't have thought so,' Carlisle acknowledged. 'Martin will have few friends. I'm positive of that.'

'Now that we're aware of the family connection, will they try to contact each other?'

'I doubt it,' Cummins cut in. 'That's the last thing they'd want to do.'

Mason smiled. 'Then we charge both of them with Harold Watkins' murder.'

Cummins nodded. 'I can agree with that.'

'Hold on a minute,' said PC White thoughtfully. 'What about this firearm found under floorboards in Zelly's flat?'

‘That’s an excellent point,’ Crawford agreed.

Unconcerned by PC White’s comments, Cummins looked at his watch. ‘Okay, there’s plenty to be getting on with. Let’s meet again tomorrow morning—ten o’clock.’

Though no obvious strategy was apparent, Cummins was creating one. If they were ever to catch John Martin, they would need a stroke of luck, as no sane person would shelter a killer. Those who abetted murder served half the sentence of the main perpetrators.

Mason’s eyes scanned his notes, finally landing on the phrase “*potential murder weapon.*” As countless things tumbled through his mind, it would all come down to forensics, it seemed.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jack Mason clearly needed another drink. At home with his wife, after another long day at the office, he was exhausted. With Brenda's overnight hospital bag packed, he was feeling anxious. Rubbing bleary eyes, he tried to adopt a positive mindset. Knowing his neighbors were keeping a watchful eye over Brenda during his workday brought him peace. It was not the best of arrangements, he'd be the first to admit, but he could not produce a better plan.

Mason felt a sense of relief as the stages of the pregnancy were approaching their conclusion. Brenda had been going through a lot recently, and he could not help but feel a pang of sympathy. Her energy levels were so low that getting out of a chair now felt an effort. Not an ideal situation, not in the circumstances it wasn't. He had done all he could, but the thought that a new baby could arrive at any moment had frightened the living daylight out of him. What if he could not get to a phone in time? What if he was miles away chasing after John Martin?

His mind running amok, he poured himself another generous measure of whisky and tried not to dwell on it. The problem was, he had never been in this kind of situation before. He had tried talking to colleagues about it, but many were reluctant to talk. Men's unwillingness to discuss their experiences was a strange and frustrating phenomenon.

'What's new at the zoo?' Brenda asked, lifting her head

from a book she was reading.

‘Nothing much,’ he replied.

‘Have you found this gold watch you’ve been searching for?’

‘Not yet, we haven’t, but we’re close.’

‘It’s surprising you haven’t found it yet, considering.’ She paused for a moment. ‘This Chief Inspector Cummins whose praises you keep singing, what’s his involvement in all of this?’

‘He oversees the crime team’s investigations, and he’s a valuable asset to have on your side.’

Mason briefly told her the latest developments, but Brenda was having none of it. Her anxiety about being by herself when the baby was born was understandable. No wonder he was losing sleep. If they did not catch Martin soon, it would be difficult to get time off work.

He changed his approach.

‘There’s a new TV drama starting at nine o’clock, and the critics have given it rave reviews.’

‘I am more interested in this narrowboat down on the River Lee Navigation. What else can you tell me about it?’

The ominous tone in Brenda’s voice cut through him like a surgeon’s knife. He’d been working far too much overtime lately and was never at home when she needed him. He felt trapped, a product of his own success, and wished he had thought this through. The truth was his promotion to detective sergeant had come at a most inconvenient time, and there was nothing he could do about it.

‘There’s not a lot to say.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s newspaper hype—journalists clutching at straws.’

‘It does not sound that way to me. Whoever was living on this narrowboat seems to have disappeared.’

‘Yes, but it doesn’t mean they’re guilty of anything. There could be all kinds of reasons they’ve left.’

‘Well, that’s not what the papers are saying. They suspect it has something to do with this Clapton Park murder.’

‘You know what journalists are like, I’ve banged on enough about them in the past.’

Brenda eyed him with suspicion. ‘If you didn’t think it was true, then why go to all the fuss of cordoning off a large stretch of the navigation?’

‘It’s standard procedure, darling. That was part of our training. You cannot just let any Tom, Dick, and Harry go wandering around a crime scene, it doesn’t work like that.’

‘So, it is a crime scene?’

‘It’s complicated.’ Mason swallowed hard. ‘We’re still in the early stages of our investigation.’

Brenda put her glass down on the coffee table and thought about it. ‘The trouble with you, Jack, is you’re too engrossed in your work, and it’s affecting your health. You’re not sleeping at all well at night and you’re constantly stressed out.’

*Blimey*, Mason cursed. He was digging a hole for himself, and Brenda was filling it in as fast as he could empty it. Yes, it had been a long day. And yes, he would have dearly loved a nine-to-five job right now. But that wasn’t possible, not whilst John Martin was still on the run.

Mason tried to change the subject.

‘What did the hospital say?’

‘Not a lot, why?’

Did they give any clue about Bambi's due date?'

'Any time now.'

'Let's hope they're right—'

'You cannot pick the time and place to have your baby, Jack. It does not work like that!'

'No, I suppose not.'

His phone rang, and Brenda nearly jumped out of her skin.

'Sorry, darling.'

He answered it, but all he could hear was a buzzing sound. He checked the display—number withheld.

Strange, he thought.

Brenda glared at him. 'One of your work colleagues?'

'I've no idea. Whoever it was, they hung up.'

'I hope they don't call you out in the middle of the night again.'

'I doubt it.'

Brenda glared at him. 'The sooner your suspect's behind bars the better.'

Mason afforded himself a rare smile. Truth out, he drifted into the kitchen to make some tea. Not that he particularly wanted one, he just needed some breathing space. Too many distractions were rattling around inside his head, and it felt like a juggler balancing too many plates. God forbid there had been another development. Not now, not tonight of all times.

'One sugar, or two?'

'Better make it one,' Brenda replied.

He poured some hot water into a mug and placed the kettle back on its stand. Life in the fast lane was not what people claimed, and he constantly searched for answers. He had worked on some tough cases in his time, but none with the

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pressure of this one.

He would need to ease back, take his foot off the gas, and produce a better plan. Truth be told, he did not know which way to turn, and his mind was in total disarray.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Mason had thought about ringing Brenda when his desk phone suddenly sprang to life. It was lunchtime, and he knew a friend would call in at home to check on his wife. Anxiously, he had not stopped thinking about her all morning. He grabbed the phone off the hook, and a man's voice surprised him on the other end of the line.

'It's me, Sarge. DC Andrews.'

'How can I help, Ted?'

'Were you expecting an important phone call? You sound stressed out.'

'I thought it was the wife,' Mason replied. 'The baby's due any time.'

'I can't help you with that, but I can tell you there's been another incident.'

'Shit,' Mason cursed. 'Where are you now?'

'Near Walthamstow Wetlands. I am down on the River Lee Navigation.'

'What's happening exactly?'

'An elderly man, while fishing near a lock gate, thought he heard glass shattering as someone broke into his car. When he went to investigate, someone clobbered him over the head.'

Mason jotted down some notes. 'What time was this?'

Someone found him an hour ago, a mile south of *Kingfisher's* mooring.'

'Crikey! How is he?'

‘Not good. The ambulance has just arrived, and he looks in awful shape.’

‘Has he given a description of his attacker?’

‘Not in his current state. We believe the suspect drove off in a southerly direction.’

‘Mason thought for a moment. ‘Do we know what model or make his car was?’

‘It’s a silver Ford Sierra, and it’s fitted with a black roof rack.’

‘That shouldn’t be too difficult to track down.’

‘I would not have thought so. That said, we have put out an all-cars alert.’

‘Nice one. We need to get forensics down there, and quick.’ The sergeant looked at his watch. ‘It’s essential that we secure the crime scene. Get uniforms involved—nobody to move in or out of the area without proper authorisation.’

‘I’m on it, Sarge.’

‘I’ll be with you as fast as I can.’

With thoughts of his pregnant wife already a distant memory, the sergeant was keen to get going. Crime scenes had a nasty habit of turning cold on you, especially if someone tampered with the evidence. And if this was John Martin’s doing, there was every chance of catching up with him. He grabbed his notebook and keys and took off in haste towards DCI Cummins’ office.

Mason was not the only officer who saw his weekend slipping away. Others saw it too.

How would Brenda cope?

That was his number one worry.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-ONE

Jack Mason's primary focus was securing the crime scene from contamination. This was a vicious attack that had all the hallmarks of Harold Watkins' murder. But DC Andrews was a competent police officer, and Mason had every confidence in his ability to do the job. Despite the recent setbacks, a sense of optimism filled the sergeant as he settled into the unmarked police car. Informed by forensic scientists that they had found tiny traces of Harold Watkins' blood group on the narrowboat tiller handle gave him a glimmer of hope. Now in possession of the murder weapon, their next step was to connect it to the perpetrator.

Blue spinner lights flashing, Mason watched as the traffic up ahead pulled over. The A107 was busy, with long tailbacks at every junction. Here he was, lunchtime, chasing his own shadows as another pensioner lay fighting for his life. It was not good, and the heavy media coverage wasn't helping either. Damn maggots, every one of them. Where did they get their information from?

Determined to take control, Mason parked up behind a stationary 4X4 BMW and sat in silence for a moment. He knew the area well and was familiar with its layout. Through the bare trees and close to the lockkeeper's house, he could see an ambulance facing south with its rear doors flung open. Now a hive of activity, the rural tranquillity of the Lee Navigation had been well and truly shattered.

Met by DC Andrews, the sergeant felt hesitant to question a traumatised pensioner. His primary goal was to gather irrefutable evidence and connect it to Harold Watkins' murder. All it took was a piece of discarded clothing, or a footprint left at the scene. Most criminals made a mistake at some point or other. Vigilance was the key.

Mason stood for a moment, taking in his surroundings.

'How is the old man?'

'It's not looking good,' Andrews replied. 'He's suffered blunt force trauma to the back of the head and has lost a lot of blood.'

'Sounds familiar,' Mason sighed. 'Let's hope he pulls through.'

Andrews nodded but said nothing.

'Anyone see or hear anything?'

'Not that I'm aware of.'

'Pity.'

They stopped at the towpath close to the lockkeeper's house and stood for a moment. He wished Andrews had had something more concrete to report, something he could get his teeth into. Mason hated this type of crime, as it always left him feeling irritable. Once forensics had finished their search of the area, they would have a lot more to go on. He had dealt with car theft before, many times, but this theft felt different.

'Who called it in?'

'One of the waterway workers. He was on his way to work when he saw the victim crawling on hands and knees. The old man was barely conscious and clearly shaken by the ordeal.'

Close to a bend in the river, just off the beaten track, a small knot of people drew the sergeant's attention. He could see a trauma-team doctor holding up an IV bag, whilst giving

instructions to a young female paramedic on the other end of the drip line. One could never rush these things; it was a matter of holding your nerve and hoping the victim would pull through.

‘Did anyone hear or see anyone behaving suspiciously?’

‘Not heard anything?’

‘Any thoughts?’

‘It appears the suspect surprised him from behind.’

‘Sounds about right,’ the sergeant groaned.

Andrews, who was a few inches taller, stared at him. ‘He’s obviously suffering concussion, but the paramedics should be able to tell us more.’

‘Another premeditated attack, by the look?’

‘The evidence points that way.’

Mason stood for a moment. Fifty yards south, he noticed the victim’s fishing line still propped on its stand. It was a beautiful setting, an ideal location for a spot of fishing. Not that he knew much about the sport, but it had a certain appeal. Patience was the issue. He had none. His interests leaned toward adrenaline sports, thrilling activities that made the heart race. Not just sitting and waiting for a fish to take the bait.

Nearing a gap in the trees, Mason could see a small team of forensic officers hard at work. He pictured the victim’s Sierra, complete with its aged leather upholstery and gleaming exterior. Not anymore. It was probably a million miles away and stuck in a secure lockup.

Further afield, uniformed officers had taped off a small area close to the navigation. The ground underfoot felt hard, and it had not rained the previous night. Hopefully, the evidence had

remained intact.

DCI Cummins joined them at the water's edge.

'What have we got?'

'A badly beaten up pensioner, aggravated car theft, and no sign of our suspect,' Mason dutifully replied.

Cummins swivelled on his heels and pointed in the general direction from where he had just come. 'I saw the ambulance... I take it he will survive?'

'Hard to say at this stage, Boss.'

Mason filled in the gaps, and Cummins jotted everything down.

'Is this Martin's work, I wonder?'

The sergeant paused in thought. 'I'm not convinced.'

'Oh. What makes you say that?'

'Watkins' killer was a professional and knew what he was looking for. He came prepared, no forced entry, no fingerprints, and little in the way of physical evidence.' Mason kicked the soil from under his feet. 'The person responsible for the angler's attack is an opportunist. Apart from the car, the suspect took nothing else.'

Despite the attack's uncanny similarity to Watkins' crime, he felt the suspect had been disturbed. The violence used, however, was brutal. Blunt force trauma to the back of the head, leaving the victim fighting for their life.

'Whoever he is, he'll not get far as we've set up a couple units to cover the main artery routes.'

'Don't hang your hat on it, Sergeant. He's probably already replaced the number plates.'

Mason lowered his head in submission.

'There's always that possibility, of course.'

As DC Andrews took off towards the lock, Cummins turned to Mason. ‘Brian Fagan, aka Zelly, is due before the magistrates at three o’clock this afternoon.’

‘Given the grave nature of his alleged offenses, people expect his incarceration while awaiting trial. In the unlikely event Martin returns to Zelly’s property, his phone calls are being monitored, and a surveillance team is watching his flat.’

‘I can’t see Martin turning up at Zelly’s place, Boss.’

‘Why the negativity, Sergeant?’

‘What, you think he’ll return?’

‘If he does, at least we’ll be ready and waiting for him.’

Mason let out a weary sigh. ‘Finding Martin will be a difficult and lengthy task.’

‘At least we know what we’re up against, and we need to prepare for every eventuality.’ Cummins shot Mason a glance. ‘When’s the baby due?’

‘Any time now.’

‘Nervous?’

‘Yes, and no.’ Mason felt his frown lines tighten. ‘Brenda’s hospital bag is packed, and it feels like a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.’

‘Who’s looking after her whilst you’re at work?’

‘The next-door neighbour is during the day, and a couple of Brenda’s friends keep popping in after work.’

‘Let me know if you need any time off.’

‘Will do, Boss.’

Cummins rocked back on his heels. ‘I remember when my first son was born, it was a stressful time. The trouble with being a police officer is, criminals know when you face problems. That’s when everything kicks off.’

‘Tell me about it!’

‘You’re an intelligent police officer, Jack, and have a bright future in front of you. The trick is to strike an even balance between family life and work. Nobody is indispensable in this job, so don’t overstretch yourself. Do that, and it will all come crashing down on top of you.’

It was sound advice, and Mason knew it. Not that he would take much notice. They were close to catching their killer, and the thought of someone else stepping into his shoes was like waving a red flag to a bull.

*No way Jose!*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mason sat in the passenger seat as DC Crawford drove. They were pursuing a silver Ford Sierra heading west along the A11 towards the capital, reaching speeds of over eighty miles per hour. As the needle continued to climb, Mason cast a critical eye over the route map, calling out familiar landmarks along the way.

‘Church at the next junction.’

‘Which way, Sarge?’

‘Left at the traffic lights.’

Foot hard on the brakes, the needle dropping rapidly, Crawford’s body language stiffened. As the undercover vehicle made its left turn, a sudden rush of cars heading their way appeared. Most pulled over at the first sign of their blue flashing lights, but some didn’t, and it was testing Mason’s patience.

He spotted the getaway vehicle.

‘Ford Sierra two hundred yards up ahead,’ Mason eagerly announced.

‘I see him.’

Seconds later, the car radio spewed out another load of undecipherable instructions as they climbed a short hill. They were looping west to a place where the team had set a stinger, but he wasn’t hopeful. Mason clutched the door handle as Crawford, always too heavy on the brakes, slammed his foot down, skidding erratically across the road as he turned hard.

‘Blimey!’ he bellowed.

‘Sorry, Sarge.’

The sergeant clenched his jaw. He hated being the passenger, especially when Crawford was driving. The risks he took made him feel like he was starring in an episode of Wacky Races.

‘I’ve lost him again. Which direction did he go?’

‘Right at the next fork in the road,’ Mason replied, ‘and easy on the brakes!’

Crawford hit the accelerator hard, and the needle continued to climb. Ninety, one hundred, they were passing Bromley-By-Bow doing a hundred and five. Then, out of the corner of his eye, the sergeant spotted flashing blue lights in his wing mirror. There were three including a Vauxhall Cavalier SRI, which was making simple work of closing the gap between them.

‘Looks like the cavalry’s arrived.’

‘Yikes! He’s giving it some wellie.’

‘God help anyone who pulls out in front of them.’

Within seconds, the Cavalier’s grill was up close and intimate.

‘Tosser!’ Crawford yelled, banging the steering wheel in an angry show of contempt, ‘Who does he think he is... Stirling Moss?’

Mason checked his wing mirror again. At first, it did not register, then it did. No wonder they were eager for them to pull over.

‘Let them through, Constable,’ Mason insisted.

Crawford glanced at the sergeant gobsmacked. ‘What?’

‘They’re part of a tactical pursuit team and keen to close on

their target.’

‘But he’s still in our sights.’

‘Just do as I say.’

As Crawford’s grip on the steering wheel slackened, so did their speed. Within seconds of moving over, three marked police vehicles shot past them at speed.

‘What now?’

‘Try keeping up with them—’

‘What, with this heap of crap?’

The car’s radio crackled into life.

*“The suspect is John Martin. Firearms presence requested.”*

Mason checked their position. It was always policy in armed pursuits to use marked police cars where possible. With a minimum of three cars, if you could get in front and behind a speeding vehicle and box it in, there was every chance of stopping it. From the sergeant’s perspective, their proximity to the Sierra’s tail was uncomfortably apparent. Fast approaching a fork in the road, the Sierra unexpectedly veered right under a cloud of white smoke.

For a moment, the world appeared to pause, freeze-frame, then it burst into sound and action. At first, everything happened in slow motion. Then, through the haze of confusion, two marked police cars collided with one another.

‘Right, right, right!’ Mason screamed.

‘The bastard—’

An ominous red glow emanated from the brake lights of the Sierra, smoke spewing from its tires. They were speeding down an alley lined with shops, their rapid acceleration quickly diminishing. It felt surreal, unnatural, as if Martin were on the verge of turning himself in.

Mason recognised the used-car showroom up ahead and hit the seatbelt buckle to decamp. Yet something was off, something had spooked him, prompting him to fasten it again. This wasn't the safest place to carry out a tactical pursuit, not at any time. There were too many people around, too many side streets, as if the killer were luring them into a false sense of security.

'What the hell?' Crawford yelled.

'He's heading for the shopping centre.'

'We're driving down a one-way street and going in the wrong direction goddammit.'

As they squeezed through the narrowest of gaps, both wing mirrors exploded into a thousand pieces. Martin's desperation to get away from them was resulting in widespread mayhem. People's lives were at risk, and no one could bring an end to it.

Then Mason noticed a vivid orange delivery truck as it aggressively bore down on them. With horns blaring, it was straddling the middle of the road and heading directly towards them.

'Holy shit!' Crawford screamed out.

The sergeant braced himself for the inevitable outcome.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mason's heart was in his mouth. His chest was hurting like mad, and he was suffering whiplash. No doubt his seatbelt had saved him from serious injury, along with the airbag which had exploded on impact the moment they hit the safety barrier. It was truly a miracle that no one died, a testament to both quick thinking and sheer luck.

Dazed, the sergeant looked around. Glass everywhere, mangled vehicle parts littered the crash scene. He had been in dozens of car pursuits in his career, but nothing as hair-raising as this. To his left, smoke was escaping from beneath the orange delivery truck's crumpled bonnet. It wasn't much, but he knew vehicles could catch fire.

A short, stubby man in his mid-fifties had climbed into the driver's cab and treated a man's bloody head wounds. To his right, a smartly dressed woman in a green checked coat was peering in through the Sierra's passenger window. She was young, mid-twenties with long blonde hair, and carried an air of authority that told him she knew what she was doing. She turned, signalled for help, then stepped aside to allow people to move in.

Was Martin alive?

The moment his police training clicked in, Mason pushed all thoughts of pain aside and turned to Crawford.

'You okay?' Mason asked, concerned.

'I think so, Sarge,' the constable replied. 'But I can't feel

my legs.'

'I'll get some help.'

A curious onlooker poked his head through the vehicle's shattered windscreen and quickly disappeared. Who could blame them? If you could not stand the sight of blood, why bother to get involved? Earlier in his career Mason had spent time as a road traffic officer. It was all part of his training, and he loved every minute. Thinking back, picking up the pieces of a head-on collision was always his biggest nightmare—he hated it.

Still groggy, the sergeant slid from the passenger seat and stood for a moment. The High Street resembled a war zone. What started on a garage forecourt in the centre of Stratford had ended in a multi-vehicle pile-up near Mile End Road. It was no longer his concern. Responsibility for the entire operation rested with the officer in charge, who had directed it from a command centre. There would be many times in the weeks ahead when he would relive Martin's irresponsible actions. It was a reckless piece of driving, an unforgiveable act of gung-ho selfishness.

He took a deep breath and tugged on the driver's door. It was stuck, and he glanced around for help. It was then he noticed John Martin slumped over the driver's wheel. Eyes firmly shut, his face had a spectral appearance, as if he were dead. Then his worst nightmare imaginable...

'Fire!' someone yelled.

Concerned for his colleague's safety, the sergeant heaved once more on the driver's door, but still it refused to budge. He panicked; petrol and flames did not mix. All around him, people were shouting garbled instructions. No one was in control

anymore, and panic was spreading.

‘Help me! Help me!’ Mason shouted. ‘I’m a police officer! Help me here!’

A group of onlookers rushed to the sergeant’s aid. As the driver’s door gave way, they gently eased Crawford out of the unmarked vehicle and away from imminent danger. In what was a race against time, he now turned his attention to Martin.

*Do not let the bastard out of your sight*—the voice in his head kept telling him.

Terrified that the Sierra could explode, Mason eased one arm behind Martin, wrapping the other around his chest.

‘Help me pull him out,’ Mason ordered.

While Martin was conscious, someone freed his legs, and Mason pulled him free. Within seconds of easing his suspect out through the driver’s door, the engine erupted in flames. Many feared a terrorist bomb had gone off, but not that kind of explosion.

Now fearing the worse, Mason spotted a tall man dashing out of a hardware store. He was carrying a fire extinguisher tucked under his arm, and an assistant was struggling with another. Everything moved in slow motion, even sounds appeared muffled. On reaching the flames, the two shop assistants worked in unison. First, they aimed their hoses at the seat of the fire, then pulled the extinguisher pins and squeezed the triggers. In what had been a quick-thinking act of unselfish bravery, they quickly extinguished the fire.

The sergeant heaved a sigh of relief.

If there was any silver lining to the escalating nightmare, it was that he had emerged from it unharmed. Badly shaken up, his head was in bits. But the adrenaline had kicked in and was

giving him a surge of energy.

He watched as two police officers involved in the vehicle pursuit began moving everyone back. Arms extended like human barriers they were desperately trying to bring a semblance of order to the proceedings. But they'd taken their eye off the ball, and Martin had spotted his opportunity. Scrambling to his feet, the killer ran straight towards a large group of onlookers. Nobody challenged him—nobody knew who he was—apart from the two uniformed officers now hard on his tail.

With his gaze locked on Martin, Mason picked up on the killer's heavy limp and the distinct flapping of his shirttail, stirred by the breeze, as he bolted. They would need to cut him off before he reached the network of waterways that crisscrossed the River Lee Navigation. Mason's biggest concern, if he could think of one, was that his suspect would have plenty of contacts he could call on—fellow criminals with a natural hate towards the police.

The sergeant gave chase.

On reaching the main shopping precinct, despair gripped him. The two police officers, the ones tailing Martin, had lost him in the maze of narrow streets. It was all too much to contemplate. His brain buzzing with urgency, Martin was slowly slipping away from them and effectively securing his escape.

Mason gazed in wonder at the vast assembly of spectators, the sea of faces illuminated by blue spinner lights. Despite all the frustration, dozens of uniformed police officers had joined in the chase. With so many officers at his disposal, apprehending their suspect wouldn't be difficult.

Then the penny dropped.

Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Martin was heading for the underground and the labyrinth of tunnels within. He turned, pushed through the throng, and made towards the nearest station.

*Just you and me now, John!*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

His neck hurting like mad, Mason ran down the stairs two at a time and almost lost his footing. Deep inside the bowels of the London Underground, he had to rely on his instincts. It wasn't the best of situations to be in. Alone, no backup, and facing a desperate killer.

Warily, he strolled down the crowded platform, looking at every face, checking every alcove. He knew he was here. He sensed it. Hiding amongst the crowd and desperate to get away from him. Then he felt a blast of warm air on his face as another underground train entered the station. Everything felt fragile, like he were walking on eggshells. As the train drew to a halt, he waited for the doors to open before checking along the carriages. A bloodstain marked the front of his white shirt, and engine oil speckled his suit. He looked battered, and people stared as he walked past.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Martin. He was goading him through one of the carriage windows and challenging him to make his move. Two doors. One choice. Whichever door he entered, he knew Martin would alight from the other.

*Feign entry*—the voice in his head kept telling him.

Both men sprang into action the instant the train door alarm blared. The next thing he saw, after he stepped back from the slow-moving train, was Martin screaming and flailing his arms. Confused at first, a whole mix of different thoughts ran

through the sergeant's head.

Unable to free himself, Martin's coat had snagged in the doors, and he was slowly being dragged under the moving tube train. Nothing had prepared him for this, and as soon as someone triggered the emergency alarm, the driver hit the brakes. The sound was deafening, yet three of the eight coaches were already in the tunnel when the train came to a standstill.

Seconds later, a smartly dressed middle-aged man rushed to Martin's aid. He stopped, turned, and threw up. Based on his experiences at accident scenes, Mason understood the human body's ability to handle trauma. He knew also that if first responders were careful when freeing him from his entrapment, then maybe.

Wanting a better view, the sergeant moved to the platform's edge. A single glance was enough. Not as he expected to find, Martin's lower legs were missing, and the train had mangled his thighs as it crushed him against the platform. It hung in blood-red threads, a sight so gruesome it made him avert his gaze.

Joined by the station manager and his assistant, Mason instinctively made his position known. Martin was in such a state of shock that he did not realise the severity of his injuries.

'What happened?' The manager queried.

'He lost his footing.'

The manager gave Mason an authoritative nod. 'I'll close the station down and alert the emergency teams.'

'Certainly,' the sergeant agreed.

'Is there anything else we can do?'

'You can move these people back before the emergency

crews arrive.’

‘Of course.’

Arms fully extended, the station manager and his assistant began moving everyone back towards the exit staircase. It would take a good fifteen minutes before the emergency services arrived, and he was hoping the ambulance crew would show first. If nothing else, they could ease Martin’s pain by injecting him with morphine.

In the eerie dim light, Mason leaned over to check the suspect’s pulse. It was then that he spotted the Vacheron Constantin gold watch. The object on Martin’s wrist ignited a flash of anger in the sergeant. His immediate reaction was to walk away and let the emergency services deal with it.

The rage surfacing, he let go of Martin’s arm.

‘Soon you will die, my friend, and they will lock your miserable half-brother Zelly away for the rest of his life.’

The killer was gulping the air in snatches. It would not take much, and the moment the emergency services freed him from his current entrapment he would die from hypovolemic shock. With blood trickling down his chin, Martin resisted with all his might. He knew he was dying, knew he had minutes to live, but still he refused to acknowledge the fact.

Mason heard footsteps approaching.

It was David Carlisle, and he was sprinting headlong towards him with two uniformed police officers in close pursuit. The profiler appeared exhausted and pale.

‘You okay?’

‘A few bumps and scratches, but otherwise I’m fine.’

‘I was—’

Mason turned sharply. ‘How the hell did you find me down here?’

‘They were lifting Bob Crawford into the back of a waiting ambulance when he told me you’d gone after Martin. When I reached the High Street, an officer told me you were heading this way.’

Mason eyed Carlisle with suspicion. ‘How is Crawford?’

‘Apart from a broken ankle and a few nasty cuts, he’s fine.’

‘That’s a relief.’

Carlisle drew back the moment he caught Martin’s head poking above the platform.

‘Crikey. How did this come about?’

‘He was desperate to catch a train, apparently.’

‘Is he alive?’

The sergeant narrowed his eyes a fraction as he turned to Carlisle and explained. He was reliving the memory. The screams, the flailing of arms, and the moment Martin slid from view. The ending wasn’t what Mason had imagined, yet he felt it was completely justified.

Carlisle looked closer.

‘Blimey!’

‘I know, and the bastard’s wearing old Harold Watkins’ gold presentation watch.’

‘So it was him?’

‘Talk about poetic justice!’

‘Indeed.’

Mason’s grin widened. ‘Turns out Terrence Lovett, aka John Martin, was terrific at throwing other people off his scent. That is how he kept out of prison all this time... he knew how to play the system.’

‘The cunning sod.’

‘Just because you change your name by deed poll doesn’t mean you’re exempt from your past catching up with you.’

Carlisle nodded but said nothing.

They moved toward the emergency exit, and Mason spun around to confront the profiler. ‘It was down to good honest police work in the end, and hundreds of hours of trampling the streets in search of answers.’

‘Killers develop over time, they are not born, and Martin is no exception. When greed takes over, there are no rules. Martin was a magpie. If he fancied something, anything, he took it regardless of the misery it caused.’

‘So, you think this was all about greed?’

‘Antiques run through Martin’s veins,’ the profiler went on. ‘Once he saw the watch, he knew he had to have it. Whether he intended to kill the old man in taking it is another matter, of course.’

‘He intended to kill Watkins all right, that’s why he went armed to his flat.’ Mason hunched his shoulders as an icy chill washed over him. ‘Zelly’s the catalyst in all of this. That is why Martin relied so heavily on his half-brother’s thugs to silence the estate.’

‘Sounds like they were in it up to their necks.’

‘Absolutely. But no man’s life is worth the price of a gold presentation watch—no man on earth.’

Seconds later, two paramedics arrived on the scene, closely followed by a team of fire officers carrying what looked to be hydraulic jacking equipment. Trailing in their wake was a short, stocky man in his mid-forties. Dressed in a hi-vis jacket with Accident and Emergency Doctor splashed across the front of it, he was panting heavily and decidedly short of breath.

The doctor stooped and probed Martin’s pulse.

‘Too late. He’s gone, I’m afraid.’

Mason shrugged. ‘That’s one less problem to worry about.’

Nobody spoke, everyone stood gobsmacked.

Carlisle leaned in. 'You don't pull any punches, Jack.'

'It comes with the territory, my friend.'

As more emergency teams arrived on the scene, Mason felt the burden of responsibility slowly diminishing. It was time to connect with DCI Cummins and share his discoveries. At least he had some positive news at last.

'We need to get this checked out,' the doctor said, pointing at Mason's head wound.

'Later. I still have a few loose ends to tie up.'

On reaching the main ticket hall, a group of senior transport officers were discussing plans. It was mid-afternoon, and thousands of commuters would soon arrive at the station. Looking decidedly harassed, the station manager seemed eager to get his trains moving again, and who could blame him. Besides, investigators could not rush fatal accidents.

Mason turned to Carlisle. 'You were right about one thing. You always said he would strike again.'

'It was in his nature to do so. These people enjoy inflicting terrible suffering on vulnerable victims ... they get a buzz from it.'

Mason's phone rang, and he answered it.

It was Brenda.

'It's me, Jack. My waters have broken, and Bambi is on her way.'

'Where are you now, darling?' the sergeant replied anxiously.

'I'm with Bella from next door. We are in the back of a taxi on our way to the hospital.'

His phone went dead.

'Blimey!' Mason cursed. 'The signal's dropped out.'

‘Any news?’ Carlisle said, showing concern.

‘It’s Brenda. She’s finally gone into labour.’

Soon to become a dad, Mason was eager to be at her side.

They could do nothing for John Martin now, and the trains would take a while to be back up and running again. Besides, there were more important things on his mind, and Mason was desperate to get going.

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On reaching the main station concourse, Mason contacted DCI Cummins and brought him up to speed with the latest developments. Instructed to stay put, within seconds of pocketing his phone a marked police car drew up alongside the station’s main entrance.

He walked towards it.

‘DS Mason?’ the officer in the passenger seat asked.

Mason flashed his warrant card through the open window and stepped back a pace. ‘That’s me.’

‘Sergeant,’ a voice announced, ‘we have orders to escort you to the hospital.’

‘Yes, to the University Hospital, maternity ward, as quickly as you can.’

Mason slid into the backseat of the vehicle feeling decidedly groggy. At least he was heading in the right direction for once, and that’s all that really mattered.

‘Are you sure it’s not A&E you want?’

‘No, it’s definitely the maternity ward,’ Mason replied. ‘My wife’s gone into labour and I’m about to become a dad.’

‘Maternity Ward it is.’

The moment they joined the steady stream of traffic heading west, the officer in charge switched on his blues and twos and moved to the outside lane.

‘Nice one,’ Mason thought, as the traffic up ahead pulled over.

It felt good to be a police officer for once.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Holding his daughter for the very first time had been nothing like Jack Mason had ever experienced before. A part of him marveled at the impossibility of her presence in his embrace, viewing it as nothing short of miraculous. He had carried out many feats of strength and bravery, but fatherhood was the ultimate test of his resolve. He had read all the books, mentally prepared himself for the occasion, but still was as nervous as hell when his daughter screamed her head off in the middle of the night.

Still on paternity leave, Mason gladly dove into the household chores, enjoying the change of pace. He'd learned how to use the washing machine, change a vacuum cleaner bag, and cook the odd meal without having to rely on the microwave oven. Not all had been plain sailing. There had been a few mishaps along the way. His biggest regret was the time he'd carelessly burned a hole through one of Brenda's soft cotton sheets while ironing. He should have been more vigilant, but his focus wavered after his daughter, Claire, had momentarily diverted his attention.

These past few weeks had flown by, but Mason was missing the camaraderie, the buzz he got from putting the crazy guys away. Despite his many new acquaintances at the station, a strong connection had developed between him and David Carlisle. They worked well together, got things done, which suited Mason's way of dealing with crime perfectly. Carlisle

was a lateral thinker, nothing phased him. Or so the sergeant believed.

Mason could not always make things happen the way he wanted them to, but he was slowly warming to Carlisle's unconventional approach to problem solving. Not that he was into criminal psychology or the behavioural patterns of serious offenders, but it had its merits. On reflection, it had been a strange couple of months. Many questions, many errors. He'd been right about one important aspect though: find the watch and it would lead them to the killer. Now rightfully back in the Watkins family, Mason was more than chuffed with the outcome. The last he'd heard, Harold's grandson was proudly wearing it and never took it off his wrist. A chip off the old block, no doubt.

Above all, Mason held firm to his pledge: to never act hastily without first knowing every detail. The more he thought about it, the more his impending appearance at the coroner's hearing on John Martin's death was becoming a mere formality. Now a clear-cut case, according to a spokesperson for the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB), Martin had died because of an accident after stepping off a tube train. It wasn't the ideal outcome to a murder investigation, but at least the evidence was irrefutable, and that's all that really mattered in the courts.

He heard a knock at the door and answered it.

Surprised to see Bob Cummins standing there, he spotted the enormous bouquet he was carrying. White lilies, Brenda's favourite. How could he have known?

'May I come in?' the chief inspector asked, by introduction.

'Who is it, darling?' Brenda called out.

‘It’s my boss, DCI Cummins,’ Mason replied.

‘What’s up now, Jack? I thought you weren’t due back until Monday?’

Cummins poked his head around the living room door and smiled. ‘It’s purely a social visit, Mrs Mason. I was in the area and thought it prudent to call by and see how you all were.’

Brenda blushed as Cummins handed her the bunch of white lilies.

‘Goodness. They are beautiful.’

‘How are the two of you keeping?’

‘We are absolutely fine.’

‘May I?’ Cummins said, pointing towards their daughter’s carrycot.

‘Yes, of course,’ Brenda replied.

‘She is beautiful. I do hope I haven’t come at an inconvenient time?’

‘Certainly not. I’ve heard so much about you these past few months, it’s nice just to put a name to a face.’

Cummins took up a seat opposite and stared over at their daughter’s cot again. ‘How’s Claire settling in? Has she taken control of the house yet?’

Mason lifted his eyes to the heavens as if to emphasise the point. ‘How did you guess? She’s a demanding little sod and has the voice of a sergeant major.’

Cummins laughed aloud. ‘Most do at that age, and it doesn’t get any easier, I can assure you. I remember our first son, he clearly knew how to gain our attention the first few months of his life. There were times, and quite a few might I add, when we thought he’d never stop crying. At one point, Janet and I were thinking of taking him back to the hospital

for a quieter model.’

It was Brenda’s turn to laugh.

Soon, their discussion turned to the recent updates from Hackney Central Police Station.

‘Just for the record,’ said Cummins casually, ‘we’ve charged Brian Fagan, aka Zelly, as an accessory to murder. The CPS is hoping for twenty years, but it’s far too ambitious.’

‘What do you estimate his sentence will be?’ Mason asked.

‘Hard to say. At least ten years, by which time Clapton Park will have hopefully moved on.’

‘I heard something about that on the news,’ Brenda said. ‘What about the other gang leader? The one who tried to stab my husband. What’s happening to him?’

‘Ah! Tony Abbott,’ Cummings acknowledged. ‘Besides threatening a police officer with a knife, he is also facing nine other charges concerning knife-related offenses. He’s a dangerous criminal who is currently in custody and awaiting his trial date.’

Brenda thought for a moment.

‘Hopefully, that will put a stop to it all?’

‘I fear not, sadly. No sooner do we take one gang off the streets than another pops up in its place.’ The chief inspector sighed, as if to make a point. ‘It’s a never-ending cycle, and there is no simple answer, unfortunately.’

Mason shrugged. ‘One day, Boss.’

‘Yes. But not in my lifetime, sadly.’ Cummins stood to leave. ‘It’s been lovely meeting you, Mrs Mason, but alas duty calls.’

‘Thank you for dropping by, Chief Inspector.’

‘As my wife fondly reminds me, a police officer’s work is never done.’

‘I can certainly vouch for that,’ Brenda smiled.

Reaching the hallway, Cummins turned at the door. ‘There is one other thing. Your informant from Tower Hamlets, Peter Daniels. How helpful was he?’

‘Boss?’

Cummins tilted his head to one side. ‘As I remember we handed him five hundred quid of hard-earned police funds for information leading to the watch.’

Mason’s mind raced. Acutely aware of Cummins’s warning about informants who betrayed secrets, Daniels had completely neglected to reach out to him.

‘Shall I say his service was beneficial?’

‘Good. Not like some scumbags I know who take your money and run!’

Mason groaned inwardly having learned another valuable lesson. Though he still had a lot to learn, his boss, a meticulous individual, provided ideal guidance.

Cummins turned on his heel. ‘We’ll see you on Monday morning then?’

‘I’m looking forward to it, Boss.’

‘Oh! Before I forget, Superintendent James sends his regards.’

‘That’s very considerate of him?’ Mason said, confusedly, somehow turning the statement into a question.

The chief inspector rolled his eyes. ‘Another major assignment has landed on his desk, but it is all very hush-hush I’m afraid. He’s holding a meeting about it on Tuesday morning and wants you to attend.’

Mason’s brow corrugated. ‘Did he say what it’s about?’

‘Not to me he hasn’t.’

‘That is odd. I thought he would have said something.’

‘What I can tell you is that you and the profiler David Carlisle will work a lot more together in the future.’

‘Does this have something to do with Tuesday’s meeting?’

Cummins made a little grimace. ‘No doubt the Superintendent will fill you in with all the details.’

Keen to get back into the swing of things, Mason wondered what the future might hold. The thought of another major assignment thrilled him, but not the mountain of paperwork that went with it. Mason hated administrative bureaucracy at the best of times, and forms were the bane of every police officer’s life. But they were still an important administrative necessity.

The moment DCI Cummins closed the door, Mason’s mind raced. Whatever it was his boss was holding back on, he was determined to find out.

‘What’s happening at work, Jack?’ Brenda asked the moment he entered the room.

‘Not a lot. There are a few loose ends I need to tie up. Other than that, it is back to the grindstone as usual.’

Brenda put her paper down and looked at him oddly. ‘What’s so important about this hush-hush meeting that is scheduled for Tuesday? Why all the secrecy?’

Mason had no answer to that.

Michael K. Foster

**You have turned the last page,  
but it does not have to end there.**

If you are looking for more excitement in the thrilling crime series featuring Jack Mason, a whole new series awaits you.



‘Once again, the author has delivered another gripping tale of murders that leaves the reader wanting more. Very believable, gruesome, well-written and engaging to the end.’

***Dan Brown.***

# A letter from Michael

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading ‘Hackney Central.’

A question readers often ask is where my ideas come from. The simple answer is, they come in many guises. Let me explain. Whilst searching for new material for my next novel in the current crime series, I stumbled across a pile of old research notes concerning Jack Mason’s early years when he served with the Metropolitan Police. I did not know that twenty years later, my first thoughts would develop into a full-blown bestselling crime series.

Set in the nineties, London’s notorious East End was a hotbed of serious crime, but it also suffered deep poverty, overcrowding, and associated social problems. The closure of East End Docks in the Port of London was undoubtedly a major contribution, but the socio-economic changes in what came to be known as Thatcher’s Britain only exacerbated the situation.

Brought up on a rough council estate in London’s East End, at age six, Jack Mason’s father walked out on his mother leaving them destitute. Life was tough, but after knuckling down and studying hard, he scraped through his police entrance exams to join the Metropolitan Police.

Known as a no-nonsense copper, he soon caught the attention of his superior officers. It was this, and a natural talent for detective work that quickly earned him the rank of Detective Sergeant.

Dispatched to the notorious East End of London, Jack's tough upbringing would hold him in good stead during those early years. No stranger to trouble, he quickly gained a reputation amongst the criminal fraternity for his hard-hitting tactics.

In *Mason*, we are dealing with a deeply flawed character, and readers are drawn to him for many reasons. Unbending, impulsive, and driven, many of his plans are back of the cigarette packet affairs. An extrovert who draws energy from people and hazardous situations, many see in Jack Mason what they see in themselves—one of life's fighters.

Thank you again for choosing to read my books!

**Michael**

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Michael K Foster  
Co Durham England  
[www.mickaelkfoster.com](http://www.mickaelkfoster.com)

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Michael K. Foster