

An Individual Will

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Published by J.G. Ellis at Smashwords

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Chapter One.

He was young, handsome – foppishly so – and, most importantly, quite dead. A thin, long-limbed boy with curly dark – Roman? – hair and something of privilege and the public school about him. A nascent artist, an actor perhaps, the sort who might have fantasised or versified about his own death – though surely such Wertheresque musings would not have included an end such as this; for it was hardly a poetic or Romantic end, though it was distinctly possible it was a parody thereof. He had been cast adrift – on a boating lake, and not a very large one at that. The boat, a recreational rowing boat, had beached itself on an island of turf or sod that would just about have provided standing room for a single person or a small dog. Adrift and beached, indeed, without a scull or paddle. It was ten-fifteen or thereabouts on a sunny Wednesday morning in May.

He had – and we had to bring him back to shore to establish this – been tied in, into, a sitting position. Coloured scarves of a silk or satin material had been used to effect this. A black scarf had been tied to his right wrist, red to the left, and a longer mustard-yellow one had been looped around his neck; the other ends of the scarves had been secured to the oarlocks and prow respectively. I wondered at the significance of the colours. I was thinking of the German national flag. It was quite an elaborate arrangement. Care had been taken, effort made. Someone, or someones, had gone to a good deal of trouble. And to add insult to terminal injury, a white placard had been hung around his neck with the word “ARSE” painted on it in surprisingly neat black letters. Someone, again, had gone to the trouble. In the top stud-buttoned pocket of his shirt, we found a 16-25 rail-card identifying him as *Mr A. Mansfield*.

So a dead young man “sitting” on a boat with a placard about his neck declaring him an ARSE: what did it mean? Or represent? Or suggest? Murder with malice aforethought, or an elaborate prank gone horribly wrong? Something about the way his head was hanging – down but slightly to the side with the mouth open – made it seem as if he were chortling goofily, or chortling goofily had been his last act. He had, incidentally, also been reported missing – by someone prepared to go to some lengths to ensure that we, the police, took notice.

“Do you know who I am?” Well, no, not quite that. Nothing so straightforwardly crass. Desperation had played its part. What she had actually said was “I don’t want to have to resort to who I am,” and she was almost crying when she’d said it. Who she was, then, mattered in the sometimes tiresome business of getting things done, or so she hoped – the local MP’s daughter, or so she claimed, a fact – assumed at first, and then confirmed – of sufficient interest to accelerate news of her arrival up the ranks.

It had, at the time, seemed like a disproportionate degree of worry for someone gone rather less than twenty-four hours. The desk sergeant had made the point, but she was adamant, and threatened to make a scene. She wasn’t about to leave the station until she was sure something would be done. She didn’t care if they locked her up. Her eye-liner was running again by this point, and it was already well-smudged. Her concern – misguided or not – was certainly genuine. Curious, though, that such a short absence should excite such extreme emotion.

Her name was Lisa Markham, and she was nine weeks short of her twentieth birthday. Darkly attractive, wavy hair worn long and untethered, there was something of the gypsy about her, though doubtless this was a look and mien carefully cultivated.

She said, "I want to see someone who matters." Imperiously, through tears.

"I like to think *I* matter, ma'am," the sergeant replied. He would have smiled had she not been so upset.

The obvious question or questions: Why are you so upset? What do you fear's happened to him?

The sergeant had asked the question – directly and in a roundabout way – the latter having to do with being sensible of and sensitive to her emotional state. And, it being an obvious and reasonable question, she had answered it after a fashion. He – the missing *he* – had stood her up, and he wouldn't do that. Not without ringing or sending a text, and he had done neither. Something had to be wrong. The sergeant was polite but unimpressed. Police officers come across lots of things people do that people who care about them are pitifully certain they wouldn't do, going missing being the least of it.

The sergeant asked another question, one that gets asked a lot: "Would you like a cup of tea, madam?" Since, in this case, it followed the impression, distinct if routine, that something was to be done, and done quite quickly, the answer, on the crest of a sigh, was "Yes – thank you."

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Waiting is inevitable in a police station – even when who someone is matters. An interview room with aforementioned cup of tea. When I walked in, she might have been forgiven for thinking – perhaps a little contemptuously – that her level of mattering was oiling the wheels, or perhaps she took me for a tea lady offering a top up.

"Ms Markham?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "Who are *you*?"

"Detective Chief Inspector Black. I understand you have some concerns over the whereabouts of Adrian Mansfield."

"Yes," she said.

It is at this juncture that I, like the Devil in the song, beg your indulgence to introduce myself. My name is Barbara Black. I was in my mid-forties at the time of the events under discussion, and, according to my few friends, hopelessly middle-aged. They liked to jest about nominating me for one or some of those television programmes where fashionable, bossy ladies, or gay gentlemen, pull you about and tell you how to make the best of your bosom and bottom. I'm wont to wear knee-length skirt suits, which I regard as smart and formal, but which have been less generously described as schoolmarmish and frumpy. My hair is shoulder-length and mousy and – outside the private domain – invariably worn tied or clipped back. I had been a, *the*, DCI in Amberton for two and half years, having briefly been a DI in the Met. Amberton has a population of eighty thousand or so souls and a slower pace of life than the capital. Friends and colleagues had correctly assumed that I had craved a quiet, or quieter, life. I had, indeed, begun to find London brittle and dispiriting.

I considered Ms Markham and wondered what to do. Would it really be quite decent or prudent to tell her he was dead? Was she not already emotionally over-wrought? Of course, the issue of her concern for his welfare was now very pressing.

"Can I ask you, Ms Markham, why you're so inordinately concerned about this young man? Do you have grounds to fear for his safety?"

Ms Markham tilted her head slightly to the right, as though trying to gain another perspective on me, or give me the benefit of nebulous doubt. She made much of eye-contact while doing this, and then, as though reaching an unsatisfactory conclusion for all concerned, said, “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

I paused, long enough to assure myself that she wasn't about to unravel on the spot, and said, “Yes, Ms Markham, he is.” And then, in a vulgar political world, a vulgar political question: “Does your mother know you’re here?”

She snorted with contempt. “No, of course she doesn’t. And the first thing she’ll do when she finds out is consult her PR advisor. Damage limitation, you understand. She’ll want to be seen to be standing by me, of course. You can’t be too obvious about ditching your family for the sake of your political ambitions.”

Melinda Markham MP, recently appointed junior minister for something or other. Ambitious, as most of them tend to be, and generally considered to be “on the up”. Frequently pictured in the local press on walkabouts with senior members of the government, and twice with the PM himself. Not forgetting the locals, the Chief Constable had got a look in, as had some *ordinary* people, including two *front-line* officers, both of whom had smiled gamely for the camera.

Lisa Markham said, “I suppose I’m a suspect now.” Indifferently, as though it would all come out in the wash without too much damage to the delicate fabric. “How did he die?” A not unreasonable question.

“He was stabbed,” I said, which was true. He was; but we didn’t yet know if that’s what had killed him. Raymond had his doubts. A deep stab wound to the chest. Raymond suspected it might have been inflicted post-mortem. So – and this was very early speculation – drugged and drunk, he had been set up as a fool – an *arse* – in the rowing boat, and then someone with a grudge had come along and, as it were, plunged the dagger deep. Plunged and removed and disposed of. Did the tableau allude to something, I wondered – a myth perhaps?

“Where?” Testily, suggesting – quite correctly – that I was being less than forthcoming with the details. Surely, I thought, a pardonable trait in a police detective.

“The boating lake,” I said. “Any idea what he was doing there?”

“Boating, I suppose. It’s the weather for it.”

“On his own?”

“Yes. Why not?”

“People don’t usually go boating on their own.”

“He did. He liked the exercise, and he said it gave him time to think. He liked to be alone. He believed most people avoided being alone. Saw it as a modern human failing.”

“Any idea why anyone would want to kill him?” I asked.

“No, of course not.” Dismissively, as though the suggestion were absurd.

“You’ll forgive me, Ms Markham,” I said, “but I do have to wonder at your change of demeanour. You came into this station in a highly charged emotional state determined that we should do something about finding your missing friend. Indeed, *in extremis*, you flouted your connections to achieve this. You gave the distinct impression that you thought him in some peril.”

She tilted her head to the right and fanned the curtain of her hair with her fingers. “Should I be thinking about asking for a lawyer, Chief Inspector?”

I watched her without speaking. What *had* prompted this change in mood? Definite news of disaster? Was she posturing in its debris? My silent scrutiny disconcerted her. She straightened up and asked, "Do his parents know yet?"

"Yes," I said. "I've just come from there."

"It'll probably push her totally over the edge," she said. "She's fragile. Adrian called her a broken sparrow. He said he'd never known her unbroken."

Chapter Two.

A broken sparrow. Mrs Mansfield – Anne – was somewhere in her forties, but she had the air of a flustered, spare old lady. She wore ill-fitting brown slacks and a blue floral blouse. Her hair was mousy and grey and tied up in a bun. “Yes,” she’d said on answering the door. “Can I help you?” She sniffed the air suspiciously, like a rabbit scenting danger.

“Mrs Mansfield?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

I proffered my warrant card. “I’m Detective Chief Inspector Black, and this is Detective Sergeant Brightly. Could we come in for a moment, please?”

“My husband,” she said, turning away. “I’ll get my husband. Alan,” she called – presumably her husband’s name; “Alan, there are police officers at the door. Police officers, Alan. They want to come in.” And she hurried away from us into the house.

“Police, Anne? Are you sure?” Alan – presumably – came out of a back room to meet her. “Calm down, Anne,” he said soothingly. “Are you sure...” He stopped when he saw us, and said in a completely different tone: “Are you police?” Curt, as though we deserved rebuking for upsetting his wife.

“Yes, sir. I’m Detective Chief Inspector Black; and this is my colleague, Detective Sergeant Brightly. We’d like to have a word with you. I’m sorry we startled your wife.”

Mrs Mansfield put her hands to her ears, and said, “They’re bearers of bad news, Alan – bearers of bad news.”

Alan said something quietly to her, and she disappeared into the back of the house. “I’m sorry about that,” he said urbanely. “My wife’s not very well.” He had the air of a man taking – perforce – control of a difficult situation, though there was something lumpish and resigned about him. I could imagine him coming apart and laughing madly at the absurd part he’d been forced to play. He was wearing a dark blue shirt with white trousers. His hair was grey-black and worn brushed back despite a receding hairline. He said, “If you’d like to come in here,” and escorted us into a dining room dominated by a rectangular oak dining table, around of which stood six matching dining chairs. A matching sideboard was adorned with blue-on-white floral display plates – at least, I assumed no-one had eaten off them. “Please,” he said, “sit down. I’m assuming my wife is correct about the bad news.”

I pulled out a chair and sat down, as did Simon – or, more formally, DS Brightly. I was rather disconcerted by the man’s fatalistic readiness for bad news. He went to the sideboard and produced an unopened half-bottle of Scotch from one of the drawers and a tumbler from the cupboard underneath. He half-filled the tumbler, pulled a chair back from the table and sat down. He raised the glass and said, “I would offer, but no-one civilised drinks at this hour. It’s just that I get the distinct impression that very shortly I’m not going to care overly much about social niceties.” He took a sip of the Scotch. “Fire away,” he said. “You have the floor.”

I said, “Do you have a son called Adrian Mansfield, sir? Tall, long hair? About nineteen or twenty?”

Alan Mansfield chuckled dryly. “Is this the check-list you have to go through in case you accuse someone of rape who turns out to be backpacking in the Himalayas? Be terribly bad PR, that. All over the local press, I shouldn’t wonder.”

Simon said, “Is that a *yes*, sir?”

Mansfield took another sip of the Scotch. He turned to Simon and said, “What are you – the organ grinder’s monkey?”

“Sir,” I said. “Look at me, please, sir. Thank you.” I paused. “Sir, we believe your son is dead. An Adrian Mansfield was found dead this morning in Amberton Park.”

He stared at me over the tumbler, and then drank deeply from it. He got to his feet and returned to the sideboard, where he poured more Scotch. “You’ll want me to identify the body? Isn’t that the form? What a mess. How did he die?”

“We’re still investigating that, sir,” I said. “Would it be possible to look in his room?”

“Yes – whatever you want. Nothing matters now.” He sounded brisk, dismissive even. “Do what you like. Take what you like. I don’t mind. Seriously, I’m past caring. I need to make a phone call. Top of the stairs on the right. His name’s on the door.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, but he had already turned away.

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Adrian’s Den, declared the plate on the door. Something of a misnomer that. Not so much a *den* as a well-appointed hotel room. Typical of a modern teenager’s bedroom, I supposed, in that there was little need to leave it, though this one was a little on the plush side. A double-bed, a flat screen television. No hi-fi, but a set of speakers attached to the laptop. Modern music collections tend to be computer-based, much to the chagrin of the phonographic industry. A pair of headphones adorned a Styrofoam model of the human head, which also sported a pair of mirror sunglasses. I lifted the lid on the laptop and pushed the on button. I wanted to check something of which I was already fairly certain: that is, that Adrian Mansfield had private access to the internet. When the Windows operating system had finished loading – and it lacked the situation’s sense of urgency – I opened the browser and accessed the BBC. The computer was, indeed, online.

We would want the computer, just as we would his mobile phone, which hadn’t been found on his body. There was, I supposed, always the possibility, surely a very remote one, that he didn’t have a mobile phone – one can *text* from a computer – but it would make him a very unusual young man; young people tend to be tediously interested in social networking, and its technological appurtenances.

Alan had made his phone-call; to someone called Martha. He wanted her to come round. “Something terrible’s happened.” Well, yes. I wondered how I might have put it in his place. What was it, though, about how he had put it that bothered me so much? The formality, I think. “Martha? Martha, something terrible’s happened. Can you you come round? My wife...” Martha probably said something like, “Of course, Alan. Don’t worry. I’m on my way.” Martha understood. Martha was something like *a brick*. Martha had always *been there*. History. Of course, there was always history, and yet... what? A whiff of misfortune revisited. Martha had always needed to *be there* – that was her principle role in the Mansfields’ drama. So – she was coming round. Of course she was. Straight away, no doubt.

Chapter Three.

“What?” This was Simon, laptop sealed in plastic under one arm, bothered by something: me, or my mien, to be more precise.

I smiled. “Sorry, Simon?” I said.

“Ma’am?” Suggesting a degree of disingenuousness on my part, or a minor economy with the actuality. Put prosaically, he was worried I might know something he didn’t.

Simon knew the Hannah Lawrence story, as, it seems, does everyone else who has had even a passing working relationship with me. It’s the first story that anyone tells about me. When questioned about it at the time, I attributed it to *a moment of heightened intuition*. Unfortunately, DI McBride, a craggy Glaswegian who died three years after the case, chose to describe it as *uncanny*. That’s Scottish *uncanny*, you understand, which is far more dramatic than its English equivalent. Scottish *uncanny* has a mad, other-worldly glint in its eye, has Auld Nick perched on a winnock-bunker playing pipes, and a plesiosaur swimming about in a loch. “Aye,” he said to all and sundry; “it was *uncanny*.”

Fourteen-year-old Hannah Lawrence had been missing for two days, sparking an immediate and large-scale search. Another girl of the same age – Donna Jacobs – had gone missing a month earlier, and her body had subsequently been found, by a young man out jogging, in a wooded area near a local reservoir in Wood Hill Green, a leafy suburb in the north east of London. DI McBride, for want of something better to do, had joined in the house-to-house inquiries. He was two years short of retirement. He took with him a young WPC called Barbara Black, who was impossibly polite and looked about twelve years old. She rang the doorbells and showed the photo, and gently urged the cursory and curious alike to take a closer look.

At ten past two on a slate-grey Thursday in October, we knocked on the door of 17 Lonsdale Road, a recently painted semi with a bay window and an extension over the garage. It was answered by a man in his late-twenties or early-thirties dressed in jeans and a dirty white T-shirt. His hair was dark and close cropped. He had a thin nose and thick lips, and his blue eyes were dim and misty. He said, “Yes?”

McBride, not for the first time that day, said, “I’m Detective Inspector McBride and this is WPC Black. I wonder if you’d take a look at this picture and see if you can recall seeing her, sir.”

The man looked at it briefly, very briefly, his eyes flicking up to McBride. He said, “Who is she?”

I explained and urged him to take a closer look. McBride emphasised the importance of the inquiry and mentioned the suffering of the girl’s parents.

The man said, “Girls of that age go missing all time. She’s probably run off with her boyfriend and is too scared to call her parents.” His voice was nasal and repining.

McBride’s face twitched with impatience. Speaking slowly, he said, “Sir, would you please just take a close look at the picture and tell us if you think you may have seen the girl?”

The man glanced at it again and said, “No, sorry, I haven’t seen her.”

“Thank you, sir,” McBride said. “Sorry to have troubled you.”

The interview over, the man closed the door. It was white panelled with a round window in the top half. It grew large in my sight, like a door closing in a dream. And then everything went black for a moment, and then I was in a box or an enclosed, windowless space. In a flash of light, like lightning in a forest, I saw a girl with terrified, pleading eyes, her mouth covered with black Gaffer tape. It played out in my mind in a second or two, and then I was back on the street with DI McBride, who was ready to move on to the next house.

I placed my hand on McBride's arm and said, "Sir, this is going to sound terribly silly, but I think that the girl is still alive, and that that man is holding her prisoner. I'm not sure where, sir, but it may be in the boot of a car or the back of a van."

McBride looked down at me. His face seemed to hold the wisdom of the ages – amiably aided and abetted by his country's national drink, but I didn't know that at the time. He said, "Aye, girl, silly," and turned back towards the door.

The man looked less than pleased to see us again. McBride said, "I wonder, sir, if it would be possible to have a look in your garage."

The man said testily, "Have you got a search warrant?" The question turned an old man's willingness to indulge a young girl's intuition into a near-certainty that *something* was amiss.

"No, sir," McBride said. "Of course we don't. Why would we? I was just hoping you'd be kind enough to oblige us. It's possible that she was messing around, perhaps with a friend, and has got herself into some difficulty. Drugs perhaps?" This was lame, and McBride knew it, but he didn't care and it didn't matter. There would have to be a pretty compelling reason for the man *not* to open his garage.

The man considered, and then said, "Hold on. I'll get the keys."

He came out half a minute later and brushed passed us without making eye-contact. He unlocked the garage door and swung it up and open. The garage was more like a surrogate loft than a garage. There was no vehicle, but there were piles of old clothes and blankets; framed pictures; a broken office chair; a computer monitor; an old cot; and a pyramid built of paint pots. Tools and a stepladder hung off the side walls.

McBride said, "Do you not drive, sir?"

This was something that could easily be checked, so the man said, "Yes."

"A van, sir?" McBride said.

"I drive a van for my work," the man said. "Why?"

McBride said, "Can I ask you where it is now, sir – the van, I mean?"

"At the depot at work. We don't get to keep them for our private use."

McBride said, "I wonder if you'd be kind enough to tell us where you work, sir?"

"Bartons in Rainham. I do their deliveries."

I was listening to this while peering into an empty cardboard punnet sat atop the broken office chair. It was empty but for a balled up piece of paper. I lifted it out. It had been neatly done, as if for a game of office paper toss. I unfolded it, and had the sensation of my blood suddenly becoming very hot. In turquoise felt-tip pen, and in unsteady block capitals reminiscent of a small child's early crayoned attempts at printing, were the words: HELP ME. And below that in smaller letters with no space between them, the initials *HL*.

A trick of memory gives me a picture of the three of us frozen in time, two as yet unknowing, the other – me – holding ineffable significance in the shape of a scruffy piece of paper. I turned. Holding the piece of paper in both hands, like a child about to read to class, I said quite calmly, "Where is she?"

McBride turned to me inquiringly. The man said, "What?"

“Where is she?” I repeated. I waited a moment before passing the piece of paper to McBride.

The man snorted and said, “What is this? Am I being accused of something?”

McBride said, “Yes, sir, you are. You’re being accused of having knowledge of Hannah Lawrence. You’re being accused of having lied to us at the door. Why would you do that?”

“This is a stitch up,” the man said, but he didn’t sound persuaded or persuasive.

“I want to search,” I said to McBride. “I want to find her.”

McBride simply nodded.

The man said, “You can’t do that. You have no right to search without a warrant. The *that* in question was my pulling open a side door that led into the house. I went into each and every room in the house and shouted her first name; then I stood in silence, waiting and hoping for a response. None came. Something about the man’s mien – I still didn’t know his name at this point – as I moved into the back garden caused a leap of hope in me. *Getting warm, Barbara*, I thought.

The man said, “You can’t do this. You have no right. I’m calling a lawyer.”

I was halfway across the lawn. I was finding him extraordinarily irritating, like a pettifogger insisting on adherence to procedure when the ship was sinking or the house burning. Of course, in his case, it had to do with desperation. With something of the air of a sulky teenager, I said, “I don’t care what you do,” and, like a sulky teenager, meant it absolutely. There was a beech-coloured lean-to plastic shed at the end of the garden. The door was shut and padlocked. I asked for the key, but was already stooping for a stone to dash against the lock.

The man ran into the house, ostensibly to get the key, but I knew he was simply running. As did McBride, who went after him. It took me three attempts to break the padlock. I unhooked it and pulled open the door. The usual gardening tools: a rake, a lawn-mower, shears, a hoe, a spade. And something, a box of some kind, covered with a grey blanket. I said, “Hannah?” Actually, and illogically, I whispered it, as though inviting her to share a secret. Repeating her name – this time aloud – I pulled the blanket off. Underneath was a battered old trunk, probably antique. As I knelt to find the means of opening it – the light was dreadful – I heard, or imagined I heard, a muffled thudding sound from within. The trunk was not padlocked, but the ornate hasp was secured instead with a metal tent peg. Crouching down, I pulled out the peg and pulled the hasp free of the staple. I straightened up to lift the lid. I struggled to do this, tearing the nail on the little finger of my left hand and drawing blood. A vision of myself, wine-glass in hand, complaining about this made me want to giggle. Fortified – or at least distracted – by this flight of whimsy, I lifted the lid.

Dark eyes found mine, it seemed, immediately. Questioning; imploring. Her mouth had been taped. She was lying on her side, facing front, towards me. Her wrists had been taped behind her back, and her legs, folded, had been similarly bound at the ankles. She was wearing blue jeans and a navy sweatshirt and white trainers.

I said something like, “Hannah, it’s okay. I’m a police officer. I’m going to pull the tape off your mouth – is that okay?”

She nodded, and I peeled the tape off her mouth. I did this quite slowly. Despite the notion that snatching it off, as it were, would have spared her discomfort, I thought it would be unpardonably discourteous. When I had successfully removed the tape, I simply dropped it into the trunk. I was not, I must confess, thinking at all about evidence at this juncture.

“Hannah, I'm going to try and get the tape off your ankles,” I said. I used a keyring penknife to cut or hack at the tape's edge – it had been wrapped around several times – and then tore it with brute force off her socks.

“Hannah, do you think you can stand up?”

She nodded shakily, and I thought: *How long have you been in there?* She was struggling to her feet with my support. Her hair was dark brown with dust and bits of dirt in it, her face red and blotchy from dried tears. We stepped out of the shed into a mizzly rain.

“Hannah,” I said gently. “If you turn round, I'll cut the tape off your wrists.”

She turned slowly, shuffling round on the spot. As I was cutting at the edge of the tape, I realized she was trembling; and as I tore the tape free of her wrists, the trembling got worse. I turned her round, intending to hug her, but she backed off and bent forward with her hands on her knees and started to heave like a cat coughing fur-balls. I realized she wanted to throw up, so allowed her space to do so. It came soon enough, mostly liquid – presumably she hadn't eaten in a while – and she hugged her stomach as though to expel more, though it probably had more to do with easing physical discomfort. I produced a clean tissue and offered it to her. She took it – snatched it rather – from my outstretched hand and used it to wipe her mouth and blow her nose. A sharp gust of wind sharpened the rain and rattled the wooden fences on either side of the garden. She shivered and I went to her and took her in my arms. She was still trembling. I heard a distant police siren, and wondered dimly if it had anything to do with us.

This incident turned out to be rather a mixed blessing for me. In a world where everyone's desperately trying to get noticed – to the point where, incredibly, they'll eat maggots, *et al*, on television – it got me noticed, though I was rather less than comfortable with the attention. I was rescued on the day by a senior officer and advised to go home. McBride was summoned to Superintendent Giles Barker's office to be personally congratulated. Glancing at McBride's report, Barker said, “I confess to being curious, Brian. What made you believe her?”

“She had a hunch, sir,” McBride said. “No reason not to follow it up.”

“I need hardly say, Brian, we're all very happy you did.”

As McBride was leaving the office, Barker said, “Hell of a hunch, Brian.”

McBride paused in the doorway. “Aye, sir,” he said; “made my day. Don't imagine she'll be a PC for very long.”

It would be a lie to say I wasn't flattered by all the subsequent attention and talk of a *career*, though I suffered for a while from what I came to think of as reverse anxiety dreams. Anxiety dreams express a fear of things that could happen – being unable to save a loved one from drowning, or a person you care about dying before you've had a chance to make peace with them. In my dreams, and there were several variations on the theme, I didn't open the piece of paper and we didn't rescue the girl. One ended with the muffled blackness of being trapped forever in the crate, another with a suffocating sense of shame as we walked away from the house. I always woke from these dreams with a rush of relief. Talk of a career was welcome, not least because my mother had expressed astonishment at my decision to join the police. I was, she opined, too sensitive and intelligent for the police force. My father countered this by saying that the police could do with a bit of intelligent sensitivity. I fear my mother rather imagined me an impecunious writer of Gothic prose.

It wasn't until I became involved in a rather unpleasant piece of office politics that I began to think she might have had a point. I had just become a DS in the Met, which a couple of my male colleagues had failed to do. There was nothing remotely exceptional about this, and I didn't give it a second thought, though there was some office banter about it, which turned out to be ill-

advised. Terry Knight, one of the DCs who had failed to get the promotion, said, "Not everyone has women's intuition to fall back on, Barbara." The next day I discovered that a female DC had made a formal complaint about this remark, and I was asked to join DI Linda Stanley in her office. She asked me if the remark had been made, to which I replied, "Yes, ma'am," because I didn't want to lie, and there were already several witnesses.

"Why didn't you make a complaint?" she asked.

"Because I didn't think there was anything to make a complaint about, ma'am."

"You don't think as women officers we should be complaining about sexism, then, Barbara?" She was sitting forward in her chair with her hands flat on the desk's surface.

"I didn't say that, ma'am," I replied.

"What *are* you saying, then, Barbara? That a remark about *women's intuition* isn't sexist?"

Since I was all at sea, I decided to take refuge in formality. "Ma'am, I'm not sure I should make any further comment on this incident until I've taken advice. You seem to be sufficiently exercised by it to have given this interview the air of a formal disciplinary investigation. I haven't made any complaint – formal or otherwise – and have no intention of doing so. And, as far as I'm aware, no complaint has been made against me. That being the case, I ask to be excused."

She considered for a moment, then said, "I think you're being rather naïve, Barbara. It matters; it matters a great deal. This is how we're undermined in the workplace." The hands remained flat on the desktop; a physical attempt to control her emotions. "We never win fair and square. We never win because we're better. We win because we have nice tits, or flash our thighs, or get by on *women's intuition*. Or perhaps we simply put out for the boss."

I said, "Ma'am, I don't understand. Are you asking me to make a formal complaint against DC Knight?"

She said, "You must do what you think is right, Barbara."

It didn't end there. Later that day at lunch, Ruth, my closest colleague, asked me "confidentially" if I'd made a complaint against Terry Knight. She at least had the decency to sound as though she thought the idea improbable. I told her frankly that I hadn't, but that someone else had, and by so doing had placed me in an invidious position. I related the substance of my interview with DI Stanley, and asked Ruth, as someone presumably less "naïve" than myself, what she made of it.

Ruth said, "Well, she obviously wants you to make a formal complaint."

"I gathered that, Ruth." I said. "But why? What's she got against Terry?"

"Nothing, as far as I know. She's just big on stamping out sexism and every other ism. I think there's a bit of history. She's had a few run-ins with male colleagues in the past, and she's represented a few female officers in preliminary disciplinary hearings. She's not afraid to put her head above the parapet. She makes people nervous, particularly her male superiors, who regard her as political."

"She made me nervous," I said. "You sound like you rather admire her."

"I do," she said. "We could do with a few more of her sort. No-one should feel bullied or undermined at work, Barbara. And it's not always obvious. It's often done so subtly that the person starts to wonder if maybe they've got it wrong, if maybe it's their fault, if maybe they're the problem. It can have a negative impact on your health – mental and physical."

"Ruth, are you saying I should complain?" I asked.

"I don't know, Barbara; I wasn't there. You clearly weren't bothered or offended by the remark; but how would you have felt if it had been directed at someone else? Me, for instance, or

a WPC who'd just passed their Sergeant's exam? We don't know who complained, so we don't know if there's more to it than an honest belief that the remark was out of order. So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. By which I mean I'm not going to complain – for the not very complicated reason that I didn't see anything to complain about at the time. Presumably they're free to act on the other person's complaint."

"Stays fairly trivial if you don't complain, though," Ruth said, "as I'm sure you know."

I said, "It was directed at me, Ruth. He addressed me by name. It referenced an incident in my past. Possibly it was gauche, but I don't believe it was malicious."

Ruth said, "Don't be *the right sort of girl*, Barbara."

"Sorry?" I must have sounded defensive.

"*The right sort of girl*, Barbara," Ruth repeated. "The right sort of girl knows when a chap's just kidding, when nothing's meant by *it* – *it* being anything from a suggestive remark in the canteen to a pat on the rear in the stationery cupboard or a full-on grope at the office party. The right sort of girl is discreet and doesn't go making a fuss about things; the right sort of girl understands that she shouldn't take things too seriously, or go telling tales out of school. Linda Stanley's very much *the wrong sort of girl*. All the boys are afraid of Linda Stanley. There's lots of room for manoeuvre in between, but don't ever be *the right sort of girl*." I must have looked sick because she added, "You can tell me to fuck off if you like, Barbara. Actually, it occurs to me I've never heard you swear."

I said, "Fuck off, Ruth."

She grinned. "Well done."

It rumbled on. Terry Knight sought me out for a word that afternoon. I hurried him into a small interview room and asked him what he wanted. He looked a bit shell-shocked. There had obviously been words. "I think I'm in trouble, Barbara. Someone's made a formal complaint against me."

"Well, you made an asinine remark in a roomful of people, one of whom complained. Well done: a lesson learned the hard way." He looked at me dolefully. "Oh, you want to know if it was me, Terry, don't you? You're simply trying to establish precisely how much hot water you're in. Gosh, and for a moment I thought you might be concerned that you'd caused me offence. Silly me."

"Barbara?" he pleaded.

"Don't ever place me in a position like this again, Terry. If you do, I'll pursue the complaints procedure to the buffers and beyond. I don't know who complained, and I wouldn't tell you if I did." I opened the door. "I don't want to talk to you about this again."

The following day, I found out who had made the complaint, because she announced herself to me and requested a private word. Her name was Tania Clifford, and she was/is the type of person for whom manners oblige me to disguise my distaste. I think she was attractive, but she was so well-groomed it was difficult to tell. Nothing was left to chance. I thought she looked false and *over-groomed*. She even *power dressed*, and comported herself as though every moment of her time were filled with something vital. She was obviously and unashamedly ambitious. She said, "I'd like to discuss my complaint against DC Knight. Do you mind?"

"I'd really rather not," I said. I think I must have sounded pained.

"I understand you don't support it," she said.

"Do you?" I said. "I can't imagine where you'd have got such an understanding."

"I gather you won't be filing a complaint of your own," she persisted.

“Gathering as well as understanding.” I felt myself slipping towards sarcasm, so I asked a direct question. “Tania, what is it you want?”

“I’d like to know why you don’t support my complaint,” she said.

“I wasn’t aware that complaints were something for which you canvassed support, Tania. If you have a grievance, make a complaint; if you have a serious grievance, make it a formal complaint. Your complaint – formal or otherwise – actually has nothing to do with me.”

She said, “Don’t you think you’re being rather naïve?” Ah, that word again. “You’re *de facto* indicating that you think there’s nothing to complain about. Since the remark was directed at you, they are unlikely to proceed if you don’t at least indicate support for doing so. It’s not just your own position you have to consider here, Barbara, but the position of every woman who comes into the police force.”

I said, “Tania, your complaint is your prerogative. Where I stand is nothing to the point, and is, frankly, none of your business. I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t want you or anyone else telling me how I should think or act. In the interests of seemliness, can we leave the subject there?”

Tania said, “Think about it, Barbara. I’m not the only one who thinks this complaint should proceed.” I took this to be a reference to DI Stanley.

I didn’t complain, nor did I support Tania’s complaint, and was thereafter troubled by the notion that I might have made the wrong decision. Perhaps I was being *naïve*.

Chapter Four.

Amberton police station has its address at 4 Piper Street on the east side of Amberton known as Abbey Green, mostly or wholly on account of the abbey surrounded by a green. It stands back off the street obscured from view by London Plane trees. Our senior burghers prefer not to overstate our community's need for law enforcement.

My office, or the office wherein I worked, was built for function rather than comfort, though the facilities manager had assured me that it met all workplace Health and Safety regulations. There were two desks, one of which you could sit behind and, as it were, interview or have a meeting with someone; the other was smaller and pushed against a side wall. Both desks accommodated a phone and a computer and a paper tray stack. There was a slide door cupboard, where you could hang your coat or dump your bag and/or broly.

Simon was annoyed with me, or perhaps *displeased* would be a more accurate description, though he would doubtless have used a more pub-masculine expression like *pissed off*. He was – somewhat – *pissed off* with me. I had offended him by not speaking on the return journey. I do not, as some people do, enjoy speculating aloud or *brainstorming* in the very early stages of an investigation because so very much is possible then. The less you know about something, the more you can speculate about it. Knowledge, evidence, closes off certain avenues and areas of speculation. Indeed, an investigation can be deemed a success when there is no room left for reasonable speculation.

I did worry that I wasn't terribly good for Simon. He didn't much care for me. An impression to begin with – vague at first, and then sharply, regrettably, distinct. I had heard him disparagingly refer to DC Neil Taylor as a card-carrying member of the Barbara Black fan club. Neil, it seems, had openly disagreed with Simon's poor opinion of me.

“You don't much care for me, do you, Simon?” Framed as a question for politeness' sake. Something like it had to be said; it was not a trivial indulgence. We were alone in the office with other things to be getting on with.

He took a moment to shift gear, then said, “Whatever my feelings about you personally, ma'am, I hope I don't allow them to affect our professional relationship, or the way in which I do my job.” Very formal, probably rehearsed.

“Can't be easy for you, though, Simon. Rather a strain I would have thought. It would be perfectly understandable if you felt moved to canvass your colleagues on the subject in the hope of finding some who shared your *feelings* – though obviously you'd want to be discreet about it.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said. Bleached of feeling; he might have been responding to a request for a file.

Was it my fault? I worried that perhaps it was – at least, partly. I had thought him faintly ridiculous. An initial impression, which I'd worked hard to mitigate. Ten years my junior, he had a taste for designer clothes, and was always sharply suited and booted, his silk tie neatly knotted in place. He styled his hair with gel; *made* it defy wind and gravity. Is it unfair to judge the apparently superficial superficially? Surely one should have more personality than one's clothes.

“Check up on the family, Simon. Find out their history. I’m particularly interested in Martha’s perspective, since she seems to be the long-term support network.”

“Martha who?” he said. He had screwed his face into the worried expression of a man who might have missed something, but didn’t think so.

“Martha I-don’t-know-her-surname-but-would-like-you-to-find-out-and-speak-to-her.”

“Who is she? What’s she got to do with anything?”

“She’s the lady with the lamp, Simon, the shoulder to cry on, the stalwart presence, the dependable support network. He phoned her while we were there. She’s probably on her way round as we speak. I’d like you to meet her.”

“What’s my reason for going back so soon?”

“Concern, Simon,” I said, smiling. “You can do concern.”

A moment after Simon had gone, Ron Turner, the desk sergeant, put his head round the door and said portentously, “A potentially delicate situation, I think, ma’am.” I wondered if he’d watched Simon go before coming in. He had been with the police nearly forty years and was discreet to a fault.

The potentially delicate situation was Lisa Markham, and the situation had achieved, or surpassed, its potential: Lisa Markham had just reported a dead person missing.

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