

PROLOGUE

August 3rd 1998

It was midday. Pat, my PA, looking puzzled, put her head around my office door and said, “James, these two police officers would like an urgent word with you. I’ll make sure you’re not disturbed.”

Minutes earlier, looking across my Canary Wharf BMW showroom from the office window, I’d noticed the police officers talking to Judy, my receptionist.

Nothing unusual, I thought. Probably enquiring about another stolen car or checking out false number plates. BMWs were high on the list for such crimes.

After the preliminary introductions, Sergeant Hawkins and Constable Lee sat around the coffee table, both looking as if they’d rather be anywhere else but my office. They’d removed their caps and laid them in their laps ceremoniously.

The sergeant’s body language bore the demeanour of a veteran; his lined, lugubrious face epitomising ‘been there and done it all’. Constable Lee appeared altogether different – young, bright and eager, more like a teenager who hadn’t yet started shaving.

“What’s this about?” I said.

Sergeant Hawkins did most of the talking.

“I need to ask you some questions, Mr Hamilton.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Yes. My wife, Lynne, stepson Georgie and my two-year-old daughter, Emily.”

“Do you own a cottage in Lymington?”

“Yes. Why do you want to know?” A sense of unease passed over me. Sergeant Hawkins ignored my question.

“And where are your family now?”

“They’re down at the cottage. I had an important business meeting here this morning. I’m about to leave to join them.”

Sucking in a deep breath, he said, “I’m sorry to have to inform you, Hampshire Police have confirmed there’s been a serious fire in the early hours of this morning at your cottage. You should brace yourself for some tragic news.”

He exchanged a glance with his colleague. My heart started thumping.

He took another deep breath. “There are three bodies inside, a female and two children, one male the other female. I’m sorry to have to inform you they all perished. They’ll need to be formally identified, but we have reason to believe they are your wife and children.”

I shook my head. “No, no, it can’t possibly be true! I’m seeing them later today. You must have the wrong cottage or something.” Again, the police officers didn’t reply but maintained their serious expressions.

From that point on, everything they said became a blur. I’d arranged a sailing lesson for Georgie the next morning, before meeting up for lunch with Lynne and Emily at the Royal Lymington Yacht Club. So it couldn’t be true.

I found it hard to explain to friends later the precise conversation I’d had with the police officers. I felt detached from it. Like watching a TV drama with someone else playing my part.

I only recalled snatches of the conversation that followed: ‘*explosion*’, ‘*suspected gas leak*’, ‘*unexplained incident, possibly a crime scene*’, ‘*3am*’, ‘*firefighters did all they could to rescue them*’.

Sergeant Hawkins continued. “Is there anyone else we should inform? Your wife’s parents, for example?”

“Look, I’m telling you this can’t be true, officer. You *must* be mistaken.”

“I’m afraid not, Mr Hamilton. We’ve checked and double-checked. Believe me, I wish it wasn’t true.”

He asked about Lynne’s parents for a second time. I stared out of my office window in a trance, trying to grasp the enormity of what he’d said.

“I’m sorry, Mr Hamilton. I need to know who else –”

Sergeant Hawkins had trouble keeping the emotion out of his voice. “Who else we should inform.”

The realisation of what had happened seeped into me. I dropped my head to my hands.

“No... No ...”

“Mr Hamilton ...”

I looked up at the sergeant. “Sorry... yes. Her mother. We’ll... we’ll have to tell her mother, Margaret... Margaret Cove. She lives alone in Limehouse Basin, a mile from here.” I gave them her address. “She’ll be beside herself.”

“Would you like us to break the news to her?”

“Yes. I’d really appreciate that.”

They suggested a family liaison officer could be arranged for me. I feebly declined. Said I’d be ok.

I wasn’t.

Once the police officers had left, many questions shuttled back and forth in my mind: why did this happen when I’d stayed here in London? Could I have done something to save them if I’d been there? Did they suffer? Oh, my God, I hoped not.

Pat entered my office. I think the police officers had asked her to keep an eye on me.

She’d been with me since I started my business. Fifteen years older than me, she became a widow four years ago. She knew me better than anyone else on the planet. Apart from Lynne, of course.

“Are you OK, James?”

“Pat, I can’t believe what they said. As Lynne and the kids were sleeping in the cottage last night, an almighty explosion ripped the place apart. Probably a gas leak, they said, but they’d called it an ‘unexplained incident, possibly a crime scene’. Pat, they’re dead!”

“What?” Pat put her hands to her mouth and collapsed in the chair opposite my desk. “Are they sure? This can’t be true!” She started crying.

I knelt next to her and put my arm around her in a bizarre role-reversal. I fought back my own tears.

“What are you going to do?” Pat said, as we detached ourselves.

“I don’t know. I want to go down to Lymington... now. But the police strongly advised against it. Apparently, there’s nothing I can do.”

“Oh James!”

“They said, because the Hampshire Fire Service and police are still investigating the cause, they won’t allow me anywhere near the cottage. Said I’ll be in the way.”

“Probably best if you don’t go then.”

“I suppose you’re right. It’s better if I spend the time with Lynne’s mother. Oh, God! She’ll be in a terrible state. I’d better let Alisha know what’s happening too.”

Alisha, Lynne’s best friend, had known her since they were five years old at infants’ school.

“If there’s anything I can do, please let me know.” Pat dabbed her eyes with a tissue and breathed in deeply, trying to pull herself together.

“Thanks, Pat.”

I left enough time for the police to have broken the news before driving to Margaret’s house. Alisha had already arrived. Margaret had been so upset that one of the police officers suggested she shouldn’t be alone. They called Alisha at work. She appeared there in an instant. Then the police officers left, saying they’d call back with any further information.

Margaret, slumped in a sofa, her eyes already red-rimmed, held a moist tissue in her hand. I sat next to her and hugged her. She whimpered like a beaten puppy, noisily sniffing back her tears. “James... James... please tell me... it isn’t true ...” Her body couldn’t stop shaking.

Sometimes, all three of us tearfully hugged each other tightly.

I knew I had to be strong, stiff upper lip and all that, but eventually, I got caught up in the communal crying too.

Alisha worked as a sales rep for a pharmaceutical company. She'd broken some rules, I'm sure, and brought Valium tablets with her. She handed one to Margaret with a glass of water.

"Here, take this. It'll help."

It had the desired effect and later, we sat in stunned silence over endless cups of tea, deep in our own thoughts, not knowing what to say to each other.

When we did speak, we each repeated our disbelief.

I thought about jumping in my car and speeding down to Lymington regardless – I wanted to see with my own eyes what had happened. Only then would I believe it. But I felt an obligation to stay and comfort Margaret and Alisha.

We desperately hoped the phone would ring at any minute and be told it was a dreadful mistake.

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Later in the afternoon, Margaret's phone did spring into life. She was in no state to answer, so I picked it up.

"I need to update you on what's happening, Mr Hamilton." Sergeant Hawkins' voice had recovered the unemotional, factual tone he'd adopted when we first met. Part of his training, I suspected.

"The Hampshire Fire Service and the local police need more time to identify the cause of the fire before we can release preliminary details. This'll take three or four days, I'm afraid."

He paused before continuing, "Thought I'd better warn you, the media have caught up with the story. Don't be surprised if they contact you. I'd advise you not to say anything yet. We'll release a statement to them when we have more facts. For now, we're still treating this as an unexplained incident."

"What does that mean, exactly?" I said.

"Just that. We won't rule out *anything* at this stage of the investigation."

I didn't know what to say.

"Oh, I've got some more details best discussed in person. When can I see you?" I explained I was still with Lynne's mother and he thought it a good idea to come to her home.

He arrived within half an hour, accompanied by a uniformed female officer, PC Kate Williamson, a stocky thirty-something-year-old, with cropped blonde hair framing a round, sympathetic face. The sergeant came straight to the point once inside the house.

"During the investigation, I'm afraid the bodies will have to remain *in situ*. It's possible this will turn out to be a crime scene so we don't want to destroy any evidence. When we've completed our investigation we'll take your family to Southampton General Hospital."

"What do you mean... a crime scene?"

"I've told you, nothing's ruled out at this stage of the investigation, Mr Hamilton. It's normal procedure."

Nothing felt normal to me anymore.

"The coroner's been informed. In view of the circumstances, he'll want to carry out a post-mortem and hold an inquest. We'll have more details then about the precise cause of death."

In the background, I heard anguished sobbing and muffled sounds from Margaret. Alisha continued to hug her and PC Williamson offered Margaret some fresh tissues.

Sergeant Hawkins continued. "There's very little left of the cottage I'm afraid. Most of the thatch has collapsed or been destroyed. Only the walls are standing. Did you keep anything of value there, any personal items?"

I shook my head. "Er... no, we bought most of the contents with the cottage, so there is – sorry – was, nothing personal or valuable there."

"Good. So there's not much point in you visiting the site, unless of course you specifically want to."

"Well, I *do* want to. I feel I should be there... with them."

The sergeant shook his head. "I don't think it's a good idea. There's nothing you can do. From the information I've received, you'd be upsetting yourself unduly."

“What about my family? When can I go and see them?”

“I think not for four or five days. The pathologist is confident he can formally identify the bodies from the dental records of your wife and stepson and from DNA traces for your daughter. So we won’t need formal identification.”

My chest tightened with every statement he made.

Sergeant Hawkins said, “There’s one more thing you need to know. The pathologist will carry out the post-mortem soon. The inquest will take place soon after. It’ll be adjourned to a future date to take into account the results of the investigation.” He paused.

“At least this will allow the coroner to release the bodies. Then you can make the funeral arrangements.”

Margaret uttered another guttural sob.

Sergeant Hawkins stood and said, “I’ll leave PC Williamson here to provide support for you. She’s a trained family liaison officer. She’ll act as your main conduit with the police and is available to you, 24/7. If you have any issues, just let her know.”

“OK,” I said, grateful that Margaret would have someone to support her when Alisha and I left.

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I blanked out the days following the fire. I don’t know what I did. I could barely remember speaking to anyone. Or whether I slept or ate any meals.

I did remember reading letters of condolence. I couldn’t stop visualising the gruesome discovery of the bodies by the firefighters and police officers.

Or hearing their anguished screams as they tried to escape the flames.

I recalled similar emotions when my parents died in a car crash nearly twenty years before. I was twenty-two. I’d not dealt with it particularly well then, either. But this grief bit into me more viciously.

I made a point of not watching the TV news or buying a

newspaper. Several reporters had tried to contact me, but I declined to talk to them, taking the advice from the police, who kept them informed with regular statements.

The next day, I met Alisha at Margaret's house and told her, "I feel so guilty. I can't help it. Why did this happen when I wasn't with them? It's incredibly unfair."

"Don't beat yourself up, James. Sometimes these things happen."

"If a gas leak did cause the explosion, shouldn't I have sorted it out earlier?"

"But we don't know the exact cause yet, do we?"

She hugged me tightly as I choked back my tears.

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Two days later, I received a call from the local police station in Blackheath saying a senior investigating officer and a detective constable wanted to visit me urgently. They appeared on my doorstep at our house a mile away shortly after the call.

Tall and skinny with a lean, mean, pocked face, DI Flood looked roughly the same age as me. The sergeant, a younger man, aged thirtyish with dark skin and brown staring eyes, wore a crumpled dark-grey suit at least one size too small for him.

The DI spoke first. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr Hamilton. We're part of the Hampshire Police Major Crime Team based in Southampton. We've concluded our initial investigation. I don't want you to broadcast this yet but we've now strong reason to believe the fire at your cottage was not caused by a gas explosion."

"What did cause it then?"

"We believe someone started it deliberately."

"What? That's ridiculous! Why would anybody want to do that?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. Sniffer dogs confirmed the presence of petrol, which had been poured through the front door letterbox and set on fire. The flames travelled quickly up the adjacent stairs. The occupants would have stood no chance."

“That’s impossible! Who’d want to destroy my family? And why?”

“These are the questions we want to ask you, Mr Hamilton. First, can you explain where you were on the evening of the fire?”

Expecting a more sympathetic approach, this question, thrust at me like a dagger, unnerved me. The detective sergeant poised his biro over his notebook expectantly.

“Well... at home.”

“Can anybody vouch for that fact?”

“No... no... not really. I worked late, picked up a Chinese takeaway on the way home. Called my wife to make sure they’d got to the cottage safely and then went to bed about 10.30.”

“And why didn’t you go down to the cottage with them?”

“I had an important business meeting early the next morning. As I told your uniformed guys, I was about to leave for Lymington when they came to my office and broke the news.”

“I see. Do you normally go down separately?”

“Well, actually, no. This is the first time it’s happened. Usually I drive down with my family on a Thursday evening and we drive back together on Sunday.”

“So this is the first time your family slept at the cottage without you being present?”

His accusative tone caused blood to rush to my head.

“What are you implying?”

He remained silent and stared at me.

I snapped, “Don’t be bloody ridiculous!”

“Mr Hamilton, we’re ruling nothing out at this stage. We’re treating this as a possible murder case. Would you mind if we carried out a search of your home? You can agree voluntarily or I could get a warrant.”

I thought if I’d said I was anything less than being happy to have them search my home, they’d handcuff me and take me in for further questioning.

I stood up, threw my arms in the air and said, “Fine, go ahead.”

“We’d like to take away any computers belonging to you and

your wife. Our technical team will look at them; see if they can find out any info to help us discover the perpetrator.”

“Take whatever you like. What else are you doing to find the person who did this?”

“We’ve got several scenes of crime officers down at Lymington looking for DNA evidence or any other clues.”

“And how long will it take?”

“It’s a major priority. We also have DCs from the Major Crime Team interviewing possible witnesses. If there’s any more news I can release to you, I’ll let you know as soon as I can.”

As they both got up to commence their search, he turned to me and said, “There’s just one more question I’d like to ask you. Is there anybody you know who’d be motivated enough to carry out this arson attack?”

I didn’t need to think too deeply.

There could only be one candidate... but he was in jail.