

THE DELEGATE

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PROLOGUE

RAMPTON HIGH SECURITY HOSPITAL

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Charlotte was a little perplexed she had a visitor at all. She never had visitors. Not surprising really, it's something she'd come to get used to . . . *again*. But not today. Today the request sent out many times before had finally been accepted, and she'd agreed to see her. *Two months of secret correspondence had paid off*. Well, secret as far as one person was concerned, anyway.

When the door to the lounge area opened and the woman walked into the room, for the first time in a good number of years, it was Charlotte Peterson who looked surprised – *or maybe not*.... They weren't so different, she and her.

The orderly indicated a chair for the woman to sit down, there were other people in the lounge and she acknowledged a thank you with a slight nervous snatch of her head. She looked about her and took a seat opposite

the patient she'd come to see. The two women initially observed each other silently, an oblong table set between them. For a few moments the orderly stood to one side, and then left them to observe from a desk further away.

"H – Hello, Charlotte," said the visitor, picking at her nails, eyes now darting between their misshapen edges and Charlotte's waiting stare. "I've been. . . I've. . . it's. . ."

The former doctor eased forward slowly, leant elbows on knees and made a bridge with her hands against her mouth. She then looked closely into the very soul of her; closely enough to see it was severely emotionally scarred, *and thus vulnerable. Vulnerable, ripe and ready.* The corner of her lips tugged into that famous half smile – her eyes remained cold. Charlotte breathed a whispered, slow reply into her hands so as not to alert anyone nearby.

"Hello, Annie. . . what took you so long?" And as Annie Longbridge smiled nervously, biting her lip, beginning to wish she'd never come, never written that letter, never got involved in *any* way whatsoever... Charlotte Peterson knew she'd found her. She had found *'the one'*. Exactly the *right* one for her very, very important work – she had found *The Delegate....*

ONE

KIRKDALE, CUMBRIA UK

JULY 1ST - ONE MONTH LATER

It was July again. The weather was still mixed and the scenery still glorious. Two full years since that summer when the murders had begun; well, the ones on home turf anyway. Retired DCI Harry Longbridge was still mooching about the house wanting back ‘*in*’ at Kirkdale nick, and spending more time than ever with his black Labrador, Baxter. At least *he* appreciated his old police buddy, his wife, Annie, *not so much*.

He waited whilst Baxter did the necessary. This was basically digging another ‘Baxtery’ type hole to Australia from somewhere within the local woods by the River Kirk, which was where they were at that moment. He wasn’t in view but Harry could hear him snuffling and scraping not far away. *Not reached Australia yet then, Baxy boy*, he thought, smiling as he swung the leather lead and turned left on the footpath towards the digging sounds. When he’d decided the Lab had had enough excavation

time, he called him using his new ‘Acme’ whistle an expert at training club had recommended. When that didn’t work he used the foolproof way of getting him to heel. Biscuits....

“Baaaax!! Bis bis!! Bis.....cuits!! Baxter!! Come on boy, BIS BIS!!” This always got him back in half a second flat. To be fair to the lad, so did a couple of blasts on the ‘Acme’. . . usually. Not today though. “BAX-TERRR!!! Where the hell is that dog?” Harry followed the now unmistakably over-excitably whining noises and quickened his step. When extreme agitated barking filled the air he began to run. Through a mixture of treelined paths, heavy undergrowth and damn near breaking his neck on several concealed stumps, the closer he got, the louder the barking became – until – until it just stopped. The scene that met his arrival would haunt him forever. Wagging his tail proudly, Baxter stood regally foursquare. . . *an arm dangling from his mouth.*

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Since their return from New York after the tracking and recapture of ex GP and serial killer Charlotte Peterson, Harry and reunited ex ‘Canon Row’ partner DI Fran Taylor had only met up a few times. Most contact had occurred through text and phone calls the last three and a half months, and of course he’d felt guilty about what had happened out there. *The whole damn thing was a mess.* His leaving London seven years previously was entirely down to their getting

too close, and his wife's suspicions and pressurising had led them to move to the Lake District in the first place. He'd honestly never expected to see Fran again.

When Charlotte Peterson had escaped on a day release from Rampton, and Fran having 'coincidentally' relocated to Kirkdale, they both knew what might happen, *especially Fran*. No longer a DS, DI Taylor had specifically requested Harry be called back in to shed light on the newly re-opened Peterson case. *Officially*, because he'd acted as senior investigating officer in 2018, *unofficially*...

Given their depleted numbers, similar to most of the country, Chief Super Chris Hitchings had grudgingly acquiesced against his better judgement. At the end of the day he knew Harry would get the job done even if he did 'go a bit rogue' on occasion. Several occasions had actually come to mind, mostly involving a lot of shouting, throwing insults about and ignoring protocol. However, Harry and Fran *had* got the job done, *together*, and Charlotte Peterson was safely ensconced back inside Rampton Psychiatric Hospital.

Fran had made it quite clear she was keeping the baby. Conceived stateside during a weak moment both had wanted to happen, no blame could be laid at her door. Or for wanting to keep the baby come to that. *The truth of it?* He was over the moon she was going to have his child. *The reality...*? Whatever his feelings towards her, he knew damn well despite being inevitable, their one-off liaison in New York had been wrong. And yet he didn't regret it. Not one bit.

It appeared her ex-husband had never wanted kids. To be fair to computer analyst Josh Taylor, neither had she in their early years of marriage, but at nearly forty-three, Fran felt it was likely to be her only chance of motherhood and she was taking it. She also intended on having her police career. Despite her, at times, flippant granite-style attitude (Harry had always assumed it a Scottish trait), it seemed she no longer wished to go through life childless. And neither did he. But there of course was the crux of the problem. *Annie...*

* * *

Understandably Harry didn't recognise the desk sergeant's voice when he put the call in directly to Kirkdale Station rather than dialling 999, so was pleased when Joe Walker arrived on scene. He was even more pleased to see Fran following, picking her way carefully across the tree roots and uneven stony ground. They'd had to leave the car up on the road in a lay-by at the wood's edge. There was no way it could have been driven down to where Harry was walking his overly enthusiastic, and apparently '*newly promoted*', seek-and-search dog.

Despite seniority, at nearly four months pregnant he could see Fran wasn't going to risk a fall by striding in ahead as per, and they were not far from the slippery water's edge either. He also knew there was no way she'd accept any help.

"Joe, it's good to see you again, lad." Harry's arm was outstretched to receive Joe's already extended hand,

and he clasped his forearm as the two greeted each other warmly. They had met up briefly in January before the New York trip, but even so, the younger man seemed to have grown in maturity again and was certainly a good deal more confident than a couple of summers ago.

Sergeant Joe Walker had been a raw PC in 2018 with Harry as his detective chief inspector. He remembered many occasions where he felt his boss had been a little unfair in the summing up of his abilities and the way he'd dispatched his duties. Despite that, it was some of Joe's ideas and discoveries that had led to solving the Peterson murders whilst in Harry's team, earning the surprised if grudging respect of his senior officer. At the end of the day Joe had still held his past DCI in high regard, and it was no secret amongst his colleagues he wished Harry was still in the job.

"Sir, you too, sir!" replied a smiling Joe, addressing his old boss in exactly the way he always had.

"No need for the sir stuff anymore, son, I'm just one of the rabble now."

"And a right shame it is, sir, I was only say—"

"Okay boys you've had a nice cosy reunion," interrupted Fran. "Harry..." She nodded towards him in acknowledgement. "Where is it then?"

Forthright as ever he thought. Harry had managed to get Baxter to drop the severed arm (having silently thanked his obedience trainer for persuading him to persist with the 'drop' command). Obviously with no evidence gloves on him as a member of the public, thankfully there'd been

no need to handle it himself. He never *had* enjoyed the mucky end of policing.

“I got the Lab to leave it over there.” He pointed to a large old yew on the upside of the path away from the water. “That’s not where he found it, though. It was further into the woods off the track because he’d disappeared on me. I was having a devil of a job getting him to come to heel and that rarely happens these days. Well, as long as I’ve got biscuits on me.” At the sound of the ‘word’, Baxter had his head in his master’s pocket, whimpering and pawing at his hand. Harry delivered a couple of gravy bones onto a happy wet tongue.... “You’re going to have to get a search team up here, Fran; Baxter’s forelegs are covered in soft mud. That means he’s been digging – and in freshly dug earth. The rest of the body could be anywhere in here. It’s definitely a ‘him’ by the way.”

“Yes – *thank* you, Harry. I *do* remember how to set up a crime scene and make initial observations. Pregnancy hormones haven’t entirely robbed me of my faculties.” Harry flushed and glanced briefly at Joe. *Did the lad know anything? Had Fran told anyone who the father was? No. Not in a million years. He was just being neurotic.*

“Yes, of course, I didn’t mean—” He stopped as Fran walked over to the yew tree to take a look at the severed arm. Joe followed after throwing Harry a ‘you know how she gets’ look.

“I agree, definitely a man’s arm by the look of it, the hand’s still intact and animals haven’t had a go at any of it yet. It couldn’t have been there long with the earth being

freshly dug, unless it's been moved. There's even a signet ring still in place." She bent down to pick up a thin piece of fallen branch and used it to turn the hand slightly. Joe paled – *he wasn't so great with hacked-off body parts either*. "Leaving that sort of evidence behind is pretty unusual," she said leaning in closer. Fran could now see what she was looking for, possible initials on the signet ring. There were two – J.J. in a scripted style. She threw the branch down and straightened up. "Whoever did this was either in a hurry or just plain sloppy, not in need of spare cash either. Joe, call the station and get Sergeant Moorcroft to organise a SOC team and then cordon this area off."

"Yes boss." As he started to walk back to the car for crime tape, he put in the call to Suzanne Moorcroft's direct line. She answered immediately...

"Suze? It's me, Joe. It's definitely the real thing, male by the looks of it, complete with gold signet ring. The DI wants SOC down here ASAP." He paused... "Yep. . . and plenty of shovels." Then he turned back towards Harry and Fran, who by their body language were now clearly discussing something other than a severed arm and the whereabouts of the rest of the body. "And Suze. . . reckon you're right. You're going to be winning that bet on who the father is."

* * *

Annie Longbridge sat in the lounge of what had become, *much like her mind*, a confused, untidy and very disorderly place. She did, however, have her spare laptop

in front of her, clean, shiny and in perfect working order. *More importantly her husband had no knowledge of it.* It had become a lifeline, an extended family. Lately she'd discovered her particular online world a much friendlier place compared with her real one, and it was where she'd been spending an awful lot of time whilst Harry walked the dog and did other 'Harry-type things'. What those things *were* exactly she wasn't entirely sure anymore. What she *was* sure of, however, absolutely *certain* of, was he was hoping to be recalled yet again, back into the job. . . in order to work alongside that woman.

She'd tried so hard not to think about it. Harry and Fran together. But it had been front and centre the entire time they were in New York as they'd tracked down and apprehended the *third* woman in Harry's life, escaped killer Charlotte Peterson, and it had continued since their return.

Of course her recent covert visits to the woman in Rampton, the psychiatric hospital home of that serial killer, hadn't helped. In fact, it had had an effect. *And not in a good way.* Annie hadn't even wanted to go there, not at all, but there'd been a distinct psychological pull, some kind of unspoken connection between her and the deadly doctor. When the original visiting request arrived soon after Harry had got back, she'd simply binned it. And the second. . . and the *third*. When they didn't stop coming she'd eventually caved. Harry had no idea of course, he was always out first thing with Baxter so never saw the post. It was the last one a month ago, the most recent, that Annie had finally accepted.

That woman seemed to understand how she was feeling. . . and thinking. She listened carefully and thoughtfully to Annie, validated and gave consideration to her worries and insecurities. She empathised. Charlotte was, after all, a trained medic. It had been her job to do *exactly* that, and despite obviously now being struck off the register, was still very good at it. Charlotte Peterson was also good at obtaining anything she wanted through the people she was living with – instigating special favours, like acquiring the home address of the retired police officer who'd put her away – *twice*.

Annie deftly worked the keys and mouse pad. Her hand hovered above the keyboard for a few seconds, then her fingers began to drum gently, randomly, not pressing hard enough to actually type anything, as if she was not quite able to make the decision to proceed. When red splashed down onto her laptop Annie realised she was biting hard into her lip. Despite the hesitation, she had felt nothing and merely wiped the blood away with the back of her hand before eventually typing the link. The site opened up, bright, blue, and orange. She stared at it for a few moments. . . then logged in to her account. The first picture came up. Not bad, she thought, and carried on slowly, pausing occasionally to begin with. *Two?* . . . *Three?* . . . *Four?* . . . *Five?* No, definitely not five – too old. Her head began to throb impatiently, in anticipation. And then she saw him. Well, well, well, who'd have thought it? Number six – *what* a surprise, and so soon.... Yes, number six. He would do. . . *he would do nicely*.