

CHAPTER ONE

Constable Wendy Richards walked into Colin's office looking anxious. "There's a woman at the front desk, sir," she said. "She seems a bit...unbalanced."

Colin and Peter had been sitting and having coffee, doing paperwork, and chewing over some cases. They had piles of forms in front of them and expense sheets to fill out. It was one of the least fulfilling but most necessary parts of police work, and they both hated it.

Life in Golders Green had been quiet for almost two years. After the excitement generated by the Hardman kidnapping, with its attendant media interest centered on the quiet suburb, it was as if the neighborhood had only negative energy, like a black hole. Whereas before Detective Inspector Colin Sommers had been perfectly happy with a few smash-and-grabs and breaking and enterings, now it all seemed incredibly pallid and boring. Not that he was complaining, really. If excitement meant kidnappings and murders, he could handle boring.

"Drunk and disorderly, is she?" Peter said in a bored fashion. He'd had enough of these revelers. The closer it got to New Year's, the more they drank and the more unruly they

became. He planned to have a drink or two himself to welcome in the new year, but, hey, it wasn't here yet, not for another two weeks or so.

Colin, on the other hand, never had gotten the hang of getting totally out-of-his-skull drunk all the time he was living like a non-Jew. Peter had been shocked when Colin had confessed to being Jewish. And he was even more bemused now, seeing how religious he had become. Although now that Colin was engaged, it all made a whole lot more sense.

"She doesn't seem drunk," Richards said doubtfully. "More like hysterical. Shall I show her in?"

"Can't you deal with her, Richards?" Colin asked irritably. "I've got these crime figures to do and all these expense forms to sort through."

"She said she thinks she's killed someone, sir," said Richards.

"So can't you deal with it, woman? What do I employ you for other than to take care of routine— She what?!"

"She said she thinks she killed someone, sir." Richards couldn't help the ghost of a smile at the corner of her lips at his delayed reaction.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Bring her in!"

The young woman, no more than a girl really, who fearfully entered Colin's office a moment later, reminded him of a frightened doe. She was painfully thin; even the bulky clothes she wore couldn't conceal her condition. Stringy shoulder-length dark hair and overlong bangs framed a gaunt, pale face out of which huge dark eyes peered like an animal in a forest. A small pinched mouth trembled, and skeletal hands clutched a wad of damp tissues, which she kept applying to a small red nose.

Colin, the hardened policeman, felt a rush of sympathy for this terrified creature, the way one might feel sorry for a bird expelled from the nest and unable to fly.

Peter, always the gentleman, leaped to his feet and pulled out a chair. "Here, sit down, miss. Would you like a cup of tea?"

The young woman sat and huddled into her chair as if to hide there. She continued to clutch the pile of tissues, and shook her head at the offer.

"I can't stand it anymore," she cried out. "I've tried to talk myself out of the idea. It's just too monstrous to contemplate that I'm capable of doing such a thing, but it keeps jumping up and biting me. I have to tell someone! I have to!"

She started weeping, sobbing into the sodden tissues. Peter ineptly made an attempt to pat her shoulder, but she shrank away from the contact. Colin nodded at Wendy Richards, who was accepted as shoulder pater and general comforter. They all waited until the storm subsided, Wendy awkwardly embracing the girl from a standing position. She looked up at them finally with those huge, wet eyes.

"I killed someone two months ago. I buried the memory of it along with the body, but I did it. Until I have been punished for this crime, I shall have no peace of mind."

"Tell us all about it," Colin said gently, cutting his eyes at Wendy, who quickly sat down in front of the computer, ready to take her statement.

The girl closed her eyes for a moment, and huge, fat tears rolled out from under the lids. She let them run down her cheeks unchecked. Wendy got fresh tissues from the box sitting on the desk and gently replaced the soggy bunch in the girl's hand. Then she wiped her face with another one.

“My name is Miriam Brandeis. I’m eighteen years old. Until recently I lived with my parents and brother in Hendon. My father runs a small kosher establishment on Brent Street, and my mother helps him do the books and sits at the check-out counter. My brother got married last year and now lives in New York — that’s where his wife is from. His in-laws took him into the family business — they sell clothing — which is a good thing. My parents would have had a hard time supporting another salary in that shop if he had brought his bride over here.” She sighed. “I don’t speak to my brother much these days.”

“Go on,” Colin urged after a moment’s silence.

She seemed to snap back to reality. “Sorry. It’s sad when families are separated by distance, isn’t it?” She sat up and blew her nose with the fresh wad of tissues and smiled up at Wendy. Her smile was so beautiful, her teeth so naturally perfect, that it was as if the sun had come out after a rainfall.

“I think I’ll change my mind about that cup of tea,” she said to Wendy, “but no milk or sugar, please.”

Wendy went to get it with a grin.

Colin wondered if Miriam was worried about kashrus. He didn’t tell the girl that he kept kosher milk in his fridge, even though he thought she could do with the calories.

Wendy returned with the tea, and Miriam took a sip before continuing.

“I am the most computer literate of my family. My parents are good shopkeepers, and my brother knows how to cut and sew garments. I like working in computers. I got a job with Intergraph a few months ago after I finished my A levels.”

“Did you say Intergraph?” Peter said, sitting up suddenly.

“Yes, their secretary Mary Nolan retired a short while ago. Why? Do you know them?”

Colin and Peter smiled at each other. "Just a tad, Miriam. Just a tad."

"What do you mean, just a tad?" Miriam asked, puzzled.

"It means we know Intergraph. We got involved with them two years ago on a rather high-profile case."

"Of course." Miriam nodded. "Josh Hardman's abduction. Well, you would have done."

"I didn't know Mary Nolan retired," Colin mused. "She was a secretary of the old school, wasn't she?"

"Yes, but she wasn't prepared to move with the times, as far as I recall," Peter added. "She didn't like computers much. And working for an Internet company with that kind of attitude can't have helped much."

"Apparently she wanted to live in the country and breed cashmere goats or something," Miriam said.

"Interesting."

She sat back in her chair and took another sip of tea. "Anyway, that sort of fills you in on my background. The incident I want to tell you about took place two months ago."

They waited.

"I hope you don't mind if I just close my eyes while I tell the story," she said, a bit abashed. "It helps me to remember."

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It was mid-December, a year into the new millennium. The weather in London was mild for this time of year, staying in the high forties, with hardly any frost. Several days a week the sun shone brightly, dazzling the eyes because it hung so low in the sky. People in Golders Green turned to each other and said, "Isn't the weather changing? Must be that global warming everyone's talking about."

Things had changed considerably for Colin and Peter since the Josh Hardman affair — Peter being promoted to inspector for one and getting a plush office. But Colin's life had, in the intervening two years, changed inexorably. At the time of the Josh Hardman abduction, Colin had been a totally assimilated Jew, barely even tolerating the knowledge that he had once belonged to the Orthodox community he scorned. By the time Josh was found, battle-scarred but alive, Colin had come to terms with his past, was no longer antagonistic toward his own people, but was a long way from being part of them again.

The American criminologist and forensic scientist Leora Jakober, who had been commissioned by the Hardmans to help find their son, had played her own part in the Colin Sommers of today. Herself a *baalas teshuvah*, she hadn't even known he was Jewish until just before she had returned to New York to continue her work with the NYPD forensic department.

Once she did know, it became imperative that she remove herself from the scene as fast as possible. She found herself thinking of him as a prospective husband more than a co-worker, and could no longer work side by side with the man. But his being nonreligious was an obstacle too big to overlook. After she signed off on the Hardman case, she returned to New York to continue her work there.

However, Hashem had His own plans for this particular pair. During their year-and-a-half-long separation, Colin had gradually become more religious. He kept kosher. He put on tefillin every morning he could, and felt guilty when he didn't. He tried to say as much of *shacharis* as his time schedule allowed. The other daily prayers, *minchah* and *maariv*, were still beyond his capabilities.