

Chapter Eighteen

He pressed the button for the thirteenth floor. Unlucky for some.

It took an eternity for the lift to descend and even longer to go up.

I tried to remain cool. My tech was running. Simon was my gatekeeper. Whilst the tower block reminded me of those early days around Stoke Newington that was the only familiar point of reference. It was just the unknown ahead.

I looked at Simon's 6'4. In his full-size out of the car, his strapping build struck me again. I was familiar with it of course, but I now feared his friend or friends could be the same.

The car seemed a long time ago, even though we had just parked up. Tension does that to your perception of how long something lasts.

I had told him on the way down that I really hoped I would learn a few things about computers today. It seemed days ago now. Yet his timeline was running at twice the speed with a different adrenaline. He was excited in the lift, couldn't wait to exit it whereas I could easily wait another minute.

Then he knocked on the door – a door which would soon shut on us imprisoning us all in this secret world.

'Hi, how was your journey?'

The new small talk began.

On the left, I could see the toilet; ahead was a small hall. In the corner also on the left I could see the living room. There was a fireplace on its left and a settee. The kitchen was in another corner and then I spotted it scanning my eyes back, trying to work out where my exit was. In the living room stood a table and on that table was a computer. This was to be the first prop.

I had only way out unless I wished to abseil and that exit was exactly the way I had come in. It was the first thing you looked for.

'Cup of tea or a ham sandwich?'

I declined the pleasantries. There was no way I was eating anything made from their dirty hands. The new friend *looked* grubby, creepy and skinny with greasy hair. He tried to dress young but was gaunt-looking in his 40s.

Around me, there was no evidence that this was what I was looking for. Just the computer on the table and whatever was on it. For no reason that I can offer, he also had a parrot which he let free around the room. I did not want that interrupting proceedings or squawking so loudly that it wrecked the tape.

On my decline, the parrot had my share of the ham sandwich.

It was all that grubby.

It was time to be gracious and ask for help. I wanted the guy to know again that I was thankful for his time and that I really did not have a clue about computers.

He began the process of going through everything very slowly. Simon just watched while he talked. His eyes were fixed on me judging my reaction. He had the power and control back.

Then it happened.

After some basics on computers we got onto pictures and he pulled up an image. It was borderline legal. This was the start. Another hurdle to overcome. The first test in the flat.

'What do you think?' he asked me.

This was clever stuff, starting with a mild yet all but illegal image to see if he could take me further. The game had started. What would be next?

'I don't know if they are under age there,' I answered.

They certainly did.

The picture changed. The second was one was more severe. This was the training so long ago. The scenario was identical. I started to talk more openly about the pictures. I was in effect saying showing me the next one. Let's get this thing moving.

Then came young boys masturbating and ejaculating. Simon was saying nothing. His focus remained locked on me. His credibility was on the line as much as mine. Despite the talk between us we had never gone this far. There was not any opportunity given his parole – until now.

'What happens if you don't want anyone else seeing a picture?' I asked naively. 'If the phones rings and you are distracted then someone walks in...?'

He showed me how to hide a picture and I marvelled at his expertise.

Then he expanded.

'I've got something in place if somebody comes in. I press one button and it's lost.'

Then he looked at me almost asking for acknowledgement of his expertise.

'It's lost,' he said. 'But it is still on the hard drive.'

This was ahead of its time in the 1990s.

Now I begin to think that if I have to call this, I must tell anybody not to touch the computer. That old and creamy device was now a vital piece of evidence. He was telling me his technique and effectively sharing that he had already hidden plenty.

'You look after your Mum, don't you?' he asked.

Simon had done me proud in promoting my cover story.

'Yeah – she has a carer,' I told him what he already knew. He wouldn't have got everything out of Simon before allowing me to come.

'Depending on what happens today, I might have to call her,' I flagged up that I was anticipating more and that I had my excuse ready to go.

'Yeah, he might have to,' Simon confirmed.

Then he was back to the screen.

I am analysing myself whilst acting the role. Are my reactions appropriate? Am I showing the correct levels of enthusiasm? If they start to touch themselves, do I join in?

I had already pre-determined my diverting tactic. I would say I wanted to wait and savour it. From time to time at the right picture I would stick my tongue out at the screen as if I was excitedly licking the monitor.

'What does this button do?' I would ask when I needed a sideshow.

But there was no stopping the two of them. The owner of the flat gestured me towards his fireplace.

'Wait a minute,' he said loving the control that his drama exuded.

The unit looked unused. Then I saw why.

He put his hand up the left hand side.

It emerged with a wad of discs.

Wow – I really was being given the keys to the castle. His giddiness and naivety were running away with him. He flicked through the lot, almost playing with them bringing them one by one. They were all indecent images. There were 800 to sit through.

If it anything the number helped stay in the zone. I was not now being tested as to my reaction. We had passed that. Instead, he was simply showing off as if it were an initiation ceremony and I was being welcomed to the fold.

'You're one of us then?' he finally came out and said it.

'I might be,' I mumbled hesitantly and in a very guarded manner.

I am not sure why I did that. You never quite wanted to say it nor did you want to illicit crime under false pretence. Equally, if you were genuinely shy and new to this scenario and with your security up as many paedophiles were, then that might be the correct tone to give off.

I was sure about one thing – that I didn't want to give him anything I didn't need to. But it was enough for him. He was comfortable. His guard dropped, interspersed only by the occasional grunt from Simon whom I had never heard so quiet ...and the parrot.

We all began to talk very openly about the images on the screen. Simon analysed a picture; he did the same then they wanted my feedback. The story was unfolding. I knew this was all it took to get their levels of frenzy heightened and I needed it for the benefit of the tape. I also wanted to be clear to those listening how many people were in the flat. As it stood there were three – and a parrot.

Then a mobile rang. This must have been semi-choreographed along the lines of 'if you don't hear from me within a specific time, then assume it is on and you can call to come to the flat. I didn't want to be inquisitive but my head was telling me this.

'One of our friends is coming,' I was told. 'They will be here soon.'

We were about to be four.

I could have used this opportunity to call but I didn't need to so there was no need to waste an unnecessary life. I think the picture was clear to those who were listening in.

But now I had to contend with our new friend and with that I knew the process would begin again. It would be time to pass further tests.

The new arrival was slimmer, thinner and in a long coat. That used to be the stereotypical image but it applied today. He came in and sat next to me and became

even more intense than the first guy. Was this how it always worked – a ladder of hierarchy?

It gave them a chance to up the filth on the screen, re-appraise me as we went through much of the same again and of course, play tricks on my mind as I tried to recall what I had said to the previous guy. Time was dragging on – there was no quick pay off here. Occasionally, Simon would chip in with a question but still mostly watched. He thought he knew every inch about me. He was the guy who sold me to them. It was clear that one piece of training rang very true. They were always interested in meeting like-minded people and that was how I had been allowed to infiltrate. Their fear was journalists but even though I was still being worked out, I was mostly past that point.

Whilst trying to evaluate my own recall, I was also living in the future. This was going somewhere. I couldn't and wouldn't get naked. It had to be called in by then. That would both expose the wires I was hiding and put me at risk. I was now severely outnumbered. Nor could I really justify in court why I was naked. To this point, a couple of hours in, preserving the disks was my priority. If the much-promised boy turned up, then making him safe was the only option. And from time to time in all this intensity, we would break for a chat and a cup of tea. An act of the most ordinary normality amidst such a stressful and frenzied hive of activity. It was as though they needed the break too.

Then it would begin again as though it was literally starting afresh. Images I had already seen and new ones and the same technique over and over again. And if I thought they were watching for my reactions before, now they are really looking at me.

Two skills were at play here. Firstly – introduce a break so I might relax and be caught off guard when we begin again. Very simple that. It happens in sport often that after a short delay or a half time, it seems a completely different ball game. Secondly, if they re-run images I have already seen with someone knew and I am inconsistent to my previous reactions then the game is up.

Then just as we are getting going again, the flat owner retreats to the kitchen. I see this now as the place where the phone rings and then I hear one end of the conversation.

'How long will you be?'

This was getting even more serious. Just when I was getting used to the mentality and the role-playing, number four was on his way. This was the ultimate test but there was still no reason to call it in.

Thirty minutes later, that door opened again. Each of them were making a decision on me. 'I think he's OK, what do you think?' was the thought process. By allowing the next one in, they had satisfied themselves that I was fine and they individually were comfortable but just wanted to pass it on for further re-assurance. I assumed I was seeing the building of the hierarchy too. I couldn't know if and when the process would be complete but I had to back what Simon had said in the car. There might be a surprise. There might be a boy. I had to work on the basis that I was passing every test so far and that at some point they too had built their excitement levels up and would need their release. I backed myself to stay in the role and be patient. I was doing well and it should be today.

The new guy took over. Number three is now sat in front of me on a stool. Number four is next to me. They are all crowding around me, looking at me. I can feel their breath. Their proximity was intimidating enough but I had been here before and this time nobody was touching me and getting close to my wire. If only they had, they would know but this was a different scrutiny to Scotland. I just sensed that if I survived the re-interrogations of my reactions then their need for their sick pleasure would be their downfall. Mr Big for Thailand was only ever playing me. This was different. These guys were vetting me so they could play with something else – as tasteless as that sounds.

In my head, I felt there were still more coming in. They must have been happy with me. They would have not incriminated themselves by coming in otherwise. Now the language had gone up a gear too. Those early simple exchanges about how to hide an image – any picture at all – had been replaced with graphic discussion about how to break the young ones in.

They had a style of communicating that was nothing short of offensive yet always upped the language to almost goad the next person to express an opinion. The tone of their voices would change – intensity became giggling. A new image on the screen would see their personalities change in their entirety as they began to talk about them. Predatory and sick, waiting to pounce, hungry for more... all the time looking to see what you might give away.

Boys of around five years old were now on the screen. I continued to stick my tongue out. The more repetitive the process became, the more intense it did. I couldn't

for one moment think I have done all this before, this is a walk in the park. No, it was worse. The parallels with police work were not lost on me. We too would often ask the same questions over and over again to spot chinks in the armour. They were doing exactly the same to me.

My head was full of several layers of recall – from the entire history of Simon and I to today and the journey down almost fading into the memory to the immediate of the last few hours and we were now four to five hours in. Broadly speaking my sense of time was gone though. I was just concentrating minute to minute.

One more arrived. This was good despite the process re-setting itself once more. It was obvious that he was respected and had that air of seniority. I took this as massive. He was ultimately going to be the decision maker, I felt. That meant this might be the end of the line. On his say, it seemed, the afternoon might proceed or hang by a precarious thread when it just self-destructed and we had to extract awkwardly. As the latest arrived with everyone bouncing each other, constantly with eyes peeled, I told myself to protect and narrate the evidence again. I knew this of course but his presence seemed to signal the end game.

He barely spoke too – perhaps just 12 words – adding to the intensity and drama. Beware the silent assassin. He who does not speak uses his skills to watch. I did not lose sight of the fact that whilst I took him as a sign that we might crack this cell tonight, I knew it also was a message to the others that they too might get what we had come for. All the signs were there for the network in the room *and* myself. We just interpreted them differently.

Suddenly the pattern was broken. The focal point of the computer and the table was no more. For the moment, that reduced the tension but it was a stress I could live with. You found a zone to manage it because it was the same all the time, just with new characters arriving.

‘Oh look,’ the flat owner stunned me. ‘I’ll show you my bedrooms.’

I repeated it back as a question so it was clear on the tape and that it was on his instigation.

But that stress that I was managing at the table in the instant that it is relieved has only short-term value because I am now dealing with a new test. I am away from the table and I might show that strain lifting from my face whilst equally have to calmly

radiate the message of 'yes please' to the bedroom. I had to show expressions that this was what I had come for.

The most recent arrival was the green light. The quizzing in front of the images on screen and the mental analysis of me all around me was over in its current form.

New tests were beginning but so was fresh scrutiny.

It did not bear over-thinking beyond a professional capacity of what had gone on in here. Had they all also undergone this vetting initiation in the past? It felt like they had a system that had been used previously. Perhaps some had not got this far but I was definitely gaining trust all the time. The bedroom was the next rung on the ladder. There was no reason to take me there if I wasn't accepted and if it wasn't to be a place where I was supposed to imagine its possibilities.

Had I ever seen anything like it? Probably not. It was full of female dresses hung up in see-through plastic bags.

'Whose are they?' I asked.

Then I realised we were now moving at a rate of knots.

'We've got this boy,' I was told quite calmly. 'He is getting past his sell-by date.'

And I hear his tone rise to excitement.

'So we get him dressed up.'

Save one child.

'We have sex in the bath.'

I now had context to Ray's words for the first time outside of training.

'We do it here too,' he pointed. 'He can take all that.'

I had on tape the truth – a confession of the previous or the greatest bravado on earth but I knew it was the former.

Ray's words came back into my head. Save one child now meant from further destruction. Like many, he had already suffered. We were unlikely to ever prevent an initial offence especially under the current legislation. The best we could hope for was to protect the future. This was always going to be damage limitation.

Things were moving fast.

'He might come to the flat, you know,' the owner told me.

I interpreted that as highly likely if I didn't mess this up. It confirmed what Simon had intimated on the journey down. I had to stay focussed with new challenges ahead. I had done the hard work. I needed to remember my basics – recall and the tech whilst watching the language that those monitoring could interpret. Then I had to re-focus on avoiding nudity, harm to the boy and timing my extraction from the flat.

I felt calm. I realise now this was the ultimate in stress.

'Oh right, is he coming to the flat?' I asked trying to give off that nonchalant attitude.

'Yes, we're just waiting,' he added.

Might had just become will.

He was getting me there in stages. The test continued but was less gruelling. Every line was a chance for me to blow it and further confirmation to them that I was sound. This man had previously experienced his wicked way with 'the boy' but I was in no doubt that the profiling which saw these people wanting to be perceived as experts actually equalled control issues and whilst they were all here for the same thing, would equally delight in the newcomer in me being the first to have a go.

My mind was racing. In reality, he had just given me the sign that I needed to play my card. I was grateful I had not over-egged it.

'Oh right,' I began a couple of sentences later. 'I don't know if you remember but I might have to make a call to my carer about my Mum. I do hate to miss anything.'

This scenario had never let me down.

'Oh yes, that's fine' he replied.

His mind was already ahead going into great detail about the bedroom which was ultimately a horrible cesspit. It had a bed mattress only in it and the air was filled with a horrible stale smell. I am sure as he showed me round he visualised previous conquests as he shared me what he like to do with the boys just as we re-entered the living room.

The atmosphere had changed.

'I hear the boy could be coming.' One of the group had made a call from the kitchen.

Everybody's ears had pricked up.

'I think he is going to call when he's coming up the stairs,' one of the group chirped unable to contain himself, his voice rising an octave in the process.

For the first time, I know now it is going to happen. It is on. I witnessed reactions in front of me that I now they had all portrayed before. The tests were over. The guard was down. That final little chat in the bedroom when he went from 'might come' to 'we're just waiting' still had a tease about it but the game of bluff was up when the whole room knew. I was no officially one of them and that mean I needed to make that call sooner rather than later.

It was time.

A phone rang.

'I'll be with you in a couple of minutes.' We all heard it. 'I'm just coming up the stairs.'

I am now ahead of myself. The end scenario is playing out in my head. I am concerning myself with the fact that the police have 13 flights of stairs to mount.

The end game was live if the boy was coming. I had to make that call. It was now or never. I might not get another chance. I didn't know what was going to happen or the involvement they had in mind for me but I would not be able to interrupt what was surely to come. I took the plunge.

'Do you mind if I just quickly call my carer?' I broke their excitement. 'They do know I might be late.'

I turned my phone on and just took the few steps to the kitchen making sure they could hear me. Their eyes no longer trailed me. Their focus was on each other's faces and most importantly, the door.

I pressed dial.

Then I activated the key words:

'I am definitely going to be late, OK. I am going to be late, OK'.

I delivered the line four times.

'I definitely will be late and I am sorry.'

It was done. At the other end of the line the message was received with stunned silence. They had been waiting for my call all afternoon and then their phone sprung into life. They were waiting on tenterhooks too. They couldn't miss my call. It meant simply watching and waiting.

Then, after the silence, came the double-take.

'Did he really just say what I think he said?' the call-handler questioned.

'Yes he said it another three times,' another confirmed.

My stomach went in the process. I am sure it was mutual.

If he comes in I have to protect him. I kept telling myself – it's all about the child. Save one child.

The excitement levels were at fever pitch. One of them couldn't stand it any more and had gone to the toilet. They were almost screaming and shouting like a baying mob – for a bit they had described as past his sell-by date which told me how abusive they were that he was probably past his use and in their eyes his best and yet this sacrificial lamb was the way they would initiate me.

All the files I had read where I had learned their mantra that they loved children and that grooming was a term made up by the media just blew up in their face. This was obviously not affection. They were preparing for control, abuse and even in their hierarchy with me now at that bottom that control and that abuse was plain to see.

It is well documented now that abusers were often abused and those whom they then do the same to continue the cycle. There was nothing here to dispute this.

The frenzy was out of control. Images were playing non-stop on the screen working them into an even more excited state. And all the time the parrot was still flying across the room and chipping in its monosyllabic two pennies worth. A comic touch in a very tragic scene.

And then the noise stopped. Everything went quiet. Even the parrot.

We were finally on.

The boy had rung the doorbell.

Chapter Nineteen

The silence may have lasted a second. Perhaps it was half a minute. It killed the noise in the room. It took me aback even though I was conditioning my mind that it was coming. They used the silence to gawp at each other with expectation. I had to re-focus.

Now time became to run at those different speeds again. It stood still in that moment when he rang. Yet I knew it was going at twice the pace on the Ops Team. That clock was now ticking. I just didn't know how long I had. I had no choice but to be confident that there was no confusion over my words.

I had been deliberate in my tone. I had to let their side of events play out.

And then I saw him.

The one who had been silent began to laugh. The control was under the way. This was the love of children they so often talked about.

The noise went back up.

Yet the boy entered completely unfazed.

He seemed about twelve – slim with sort hair, blue jeans and clean trainers. He didn't look like he had been to school. I would never know what hold they had on him

that he came on demand when he got the call, as I had to assume he had done previously. He seemed numb to abuse. I would later learn that he had in fact been passed from group to group.

The unfazed look on his face I know understand as immune – all senses and sensitivities ripped out of him.

My task was as simple as it was complicated. I had to keep this scenario live but sterile. I had to find a way to time all of this to a heightened point of all but caught in the act by the moment my colleagues would bash down the door even though I did not how far away that moment was.

In the interim, I had to play a lead role.

‘This is John,’ one of the group told of the boy ushering him to me.

Whilst that was not my name, I never knew his. Their so-called love of children was so disrespectful names were an irrelevance and he had been groomed so well that there was no apprehension in his body at all or any fear in his face. He just looked as though sex – once or multiple – was par for the course.

I had passed all their tests. They were about to offer me the ultimate prize in their eyes. They would wait, desperate to see me with the boy. What kind of love was that too that they all craved this poor poor lad but then were going to give him away to a relative stranger? This was abuse, control and entertainment.

They thrust him towards my arms as I sat near the table again with the images still flashing behind me. My seat was calculated. I knew I had to safeguard that machine amongst all my other priorities.

They began to pull his private parts.

That clock was ticking again. I had no idea if it had been minutes or much longer. It obviously felt like the latter. I assumed they were on that way. I had left it to the last possible minute.

It’s all about the child. Save one child. This is what it meant as they went to take the boys trousers off.

The boy was on my lap. They are goading us both on. I do not feel any danger just tension. I am aware this can get out of hand. The situation is *both* dangerous and safe. As he sits on my knee I am thinking that there is no way I am leaving this position. I will secure him. Save one child. It feels like twenty minutes now and they still have not come. I am trying to delay as if to let the room now I am savouring this beautiful moment.

Outside I am unaware of the chaos that my team are embroiled in. The first set of officers find the lift is not working – that very same lift I had ascended in with Simon as a tension unrecognisable from this began to mount. That adrenaline now seemed miniscule. Their stress is different. They have to run the thirteen flights avoiding noise and attention though thankfully in the flat the volume is high and the spotlight is on the boy.

This is the wildcard of life again. Why was that lift not working? I had none of these answers at the time because I didn't have that knowledge. All I could start to think was that they hadn't heard me. The equipment must have failed me. I have an obligation to protect this boy yet I don't know how long I have. I must hang on. I have to let the scenario play out and make the call myself if I bale according to the set of circumstances I am in and not because I perceive that five minutes has actually been an hour.

I resolve to delay as much as I can whilst masquerading as a man very much enjoying the moment. The parrot started up again to add to the cacophony in the room. Alongside that, I am doing my best to provide commentary for the tape without over-doing it all the time battling the voice in my head which is measuring time and taunting me as to where the back team are.

I know they are looking at me thinking why hasn't he done anything yet. Yet equally the thrill was in the chase and they were enjoying the show. There had to be a cut off time. Every time it said the pressure to make it now accentuated but instead I just suit there holding him tight and he clings to me too. My body and my mind are poles apart. The thought process is telling me to get out; yet the limbs are not moving. The physical me rightly defies the mental one. I stay put for as long as I can. I am making the boy safe. This will be the only time he walks out of this flat intact. That is my mantra as I slap down the thoughts of fleeing – but still they return.

I am doing well, I tell myself. Keep going. This all started on a bus in Newcastle. Months later you are in a flat in Coventry and you have them. This is the groundwork in Scotland and the research in Amsterdam. It's for all those images you viewed allowed

and learnt your reactions. It's for all the stuff you didn't bring home and it'd for the child. All this can be worth it to save one child.

I am so nearly there but what is my next move? I am not coming on to him. He grips my t-shirt. I don't know if he recognises he might be safe for once. I don't know if our clench feels different and *safe* or if he is just waiting for it all to start. He is gripping me tight. If he is immune to abuse then he won't recognise comfort either. The experts can deal with his thought process after, I reason.

Everybody is laughing in the room. I am a figure of fun and the boy is taunted. They *are* waiting for me to make a move. I see Simon from the corner of my eye. He is totally in the zone loving every moment egging me on. The others do not take their eyes off me.

I hoped words would derail the process.

'What a lovely boy. You look nice. You're so slim,' I lied.

I recognised the haunted soul of the abused.

The clock continues to tick. I know I am in the shit. Something has gone wrong. I have to come clean. I am out of chances. I have taken this as far as I can. We have enough on tape to prosecute under the laws of the day and we need go no further given that I cannot and will not sacrifice the boy to abuse for the sake of keeping the network live and leading me to the next sting.

That was the rule. We didn't work like that. I told myself we had enough.

Clarity. There is nothing left to do.

It is time to get the boy out of the flat.