

BROKEN CHAINS

DARRYL DONAGHUE

ONE

Sarah pressed the button. The sirens blared from the top of the car and the blue lights reflected in the rear window of the red Volvo ahead, as it indicated and veered over to the left.

‘How’d the first time feel?’ Roberts asked. PC Paul Roberts, her crewing buddy, had five years’ service. Enough experience to offer guidance, but still be able to remember what it was like to be fresh out of the box.

‘I expected more...oomph.’ This was her first day on independent patrol. She’d been on blues runs before, but that had been with a tutor in the driver’s seat. She’d pressed the button during her driver’s training course, but this was her first real response call.

‘Putting your foot down ought to address that.’

The row of cars in front made way, giving her a clear road ahead. She changed up through the gears and accelerated her patrol car to an uncomfortable speed. Sarah owned a Yaris. A small, comfortable and safe hatchback, marketed towards and primarily enjoyed by the over-sixties. This was a souped-up Ford Focus; as far apart as lions and kittens.

Sarah held her earpiece in place as the controller came over the radio with a further update.

‘Further in from caller. One man on the ground with a head injury. Ambulance en route, holding off for police attendance. EH206, ETA?’

‘EH206 to Control. We’re coming into Osbasten now, ETA three or four minutes. Any units can back up?’ Paul returned the call while Sarah concentrated on getting them there in one piece. A beat-up blue Fiesta was between her and the roundabout, and it didn’t look like it was going to move.

‘EH206, all units are tucked up. Control to any available unit, any available unit able to assist with a two-person fight, Pinders Road, Osbasten?’

Silence.

The rear seat of the Fiesta was stacked so high with boxes there was no way the driver could see through the rear-view mirror. The roundabout was in full swing. Sarah considered swerving onto the right side of the road, an option in extreme circumstances, but not one she was going to commit to just yet. She slowed the car before approaching the roundabout.

‘Control to EH206, no response.’

‘EH206, confirmed.’ Paul released his talk button. ‘Steady going into this. Slow it down. Don’t risk a pile-up for some scummers in a fight. Slower.’

The Fiesta slowed to an almost-halt before joining the roundabout. A red Mazda came around the curve from the right. *Just enough space.* Sarah spun the wheel left, taking the car onto the grass, around the Fiesta, and tucking back onto the roundabout metres in front of the Mazda. The driver slammed on the brakes. If he blared his horn, Sarah didn’t hear it over the klaxons. The other cars waited

at the roundabout exits until she turned off at exit three for Osbasten.

Sarah released the breath she'd been holding. 'There was enough space. Just.'

'Clearly.' Paul looked back through the rear window. 'No harm done. This time.'

Sarah turned onto Pinders Road.

'There. Up ahead. Two males.' She turned the sirens and lights off and stopped the car a short distance from the pair. One male, a teenage boy, had a chain wrapped around his right fist. Sarah saw his tattooed forearm but couldn't make out any detail. He swung his chained fist into an older man's face. The force flung the victim into the side of a parked car, his legs losing all strength like the ground had been yanked from under him. Blood poured from his mouth and he spat red phlegm onto the tarmac. His attacker went in for a kick, winding his leg back, like pulling back elastic readying it to fly forward, but he clocked the police and bolted instead.

Sarah got out of the car. Her stomach bubbled with nerves as thoughts of stopping the violence competed with the instinctive need to consider her own safety. All the training, all the equipment, still didn't silence the thought, however momentary, that she teased death every time she stepped out of the car.

'Get back.' Sarah put her hand on her pepper spray. She'd been issued with CAPTOR, a PAVA-based pepper spray alternative to CS gas. CAPTOR sprayed a direct fluid which was highly targetable and had a sticky quality to it, making it very difficult to remove the effects of a well-aimed shot to the eyes. Sarah had been 'captored' during her initial training and had spent the subsequent twenty minutes not able to see a thing and being walked around by a colleague

as tears streamed from her eyes. It gave her an appreciation and respect for the tools of the trade. Telling whether a suspect had been captured before was easy; there was an involuntary shudder whenever she reached for it.

The aggressor fled, leaving the victim on his knees, propped up by the car and holding on to his face and ribs.

‘EH206 to Control, on scene. Suspect fled along Pinders Road towards Engles Road. Male, white, slim build, approximately mid-teens in possession of a chain and a heavily tattooed right forearm. So far?’

‘So far.’

‘One injured party. Struck with chain to the face. Possible GBH injuries, male, mid-forties, conscious and breathing.’

Sarah checked the pavement and the immediate area for other injured parties or discarded weapons, while Paul crouched next to the victim.

‘The ambulance is on the way. We’ll get you looked at. What’s your name, mate? What was this all about? You know that lad, do ya?’

‘Mmmuh.’

Sarah came back to where Roberts and the victim were by the side of the car. ‘The area’s clear. You happy to wait with him for the ambulance and I’ll see if I can locate the suspect?’ Safety came first. There were always other ways to locate suspects. Forensic examinations, identifying witnesses and tapping up local snouts were among a host of available tools. When there were injured parties and officer safety issues, galloping after the bad guys lasso in hand, had to wait.

‘Go for it. Doesn’t sound like anyone else is available. Be careful. Don’t plough in if you don’t feel safe.’

Sarah took a look at the victim. The man’s jaw put out

at an awkward angle and it was unlikely he'd be able to talk. Still, the slightest piece of information could help them locate the suspect. She opened the car and Paul took a roll of blue and white police tape from the boot to seal off the scene. The ambulance turned onto the road behind her as she started the put the keys in the ignition.

'EH206 to Control. PC Roberts is staying with the victim and will attend the hospital. Scene is on at Pinders Road and needs staffing. So far?'

'So far.'

'Could you put out an attention drawn to all units for a white male, shaved head, around sixteen years old with a tattoo on his right forearm? Suspect in a GBH?'

'Will do.'

'I'm mobile again and trying to locate the suspect.'

TWO

Osbasten was the busiest town in the district. She'd heard it described as one big council estate, which wasn't strictly true. The town had accepted a cash injection from the London Borough Councils to rehouse some of their problem families. Someone, somewhere always benefited from these little deals, but it was very rarely people from the town or the displaced families who enjoyed the payoff.

Sarah drove onto Engles Road before turning onto the main high street. There was little to it. Mostly boarded-up shops, a Dellas Chicken, a Greggs bakery and a small Tesco Express with a security guard standing outside. A traffic warden strolled towards her as she waited at the junction. She wound her window down and leant her head out as much as her seatbelt allowed.

'Hi. Haven't seen any suspicious-looking males come by this way, have you? White, mid-teens? Shaved head?' She waved her hand over her head in an involuntary gesture for baldness, the same way she typed in mid-air whenever she said the word computer.

The traffic warden put his hand on the roof and thought for a moment, scratching his chin. His white stubble was like spilt sugar and his hat a little too big for his head.

‘Can’t say I have. Local thugs, are they? Get a lot of that round here. More cars vandalised in the park the other day. Smash ‘em up just for kicks; wing mirrors clean off. Scratch the bonnet, the lot. Smashed windows too some of ‘em. Little buggers, they are.’

‘Sure seems that way, sir. He has a tattoo covering his right forearm. Seen anyone of that description around here in the past ten minutes?’

He looked up, having another think. ‘Can’t say I have.’

‘If you do, could you call it in? Mention my call sign, EH206, and let them know the location. Don’t approach him yourself, of course.’

‘Will do, Officer. What’ve they done?’

‘A serious assault nearby here.’

‘Bloody savages. Good luck finding them.’

Sarah drove along the high street, keeping an eye out for anyone matching the description. If they were locals, they were unlikely to hit the main road as it was covered in CCTV. She turned right, back onto the side streets, and headed towards the Glendale Estate.

Glendale was the largest estate in Osbasten. Three dilapidated tower blocks stood in a row. The buildings wrapped in metal steps and walkways leading to floor after floor of cramped living spaces. The residents on estates like this came from a range of backgrounds, all brought together by needs they couldn’t fulfil on their own. Sarah had met some of the residents of Glendale before. Some were single parents down on their luck, others were disabled people unable to work. She’d even met a war veteran who’d risked

his life for his country, only to spend his final years living alone and being unable to afford to heat his flat. There were also third-generation welfare families with little intention of ever changing their lot. The last group was the minority, but was the first that came to mind when people talked about the Glendale Estate. It was a small community, where everyone knew each other, and she hoped she'd find someone willing to tell her something about her suspect.

The car park was empty save for two boys and a girl, sitting on a stone wall near the entrances to the first tower. Sarah parked the car outside the estate as per policy guidelines. Parking on site was only recommended in emergency situations, as police vehicles had been pelted with everything from fruit to stones and, on one occasion, a brick had been dropped from a twenty-sixth story window through a windscreen. She called up to the control room and let them know her location, in case anything went wrong.

Approaching people while in uniform was an unusual feeling and took some getting used to. When she'd first put it on, just looking at herself in the mirror or catching herself as she walked past a window wearing a black bowler hat and bright yellow jacket made her feel ridiculous. She felt a deep-seated sense of awkwardness about approaching the public, something she didn't think would go away anytime soon. She wondered why people answered her questions. Whenever she approached a member of the public, the stifling thought that they'd just tell her to get lost always popped into her head just before she opened her mouth, despite the fact no one ever had. There was an underlying compliance that came with the uniform. Everyone saw something different when they saw it, a saviour or an oppressor, an essential part of civilised society or nothing

more than an inconvenience – and their preconceived ideas dictated how the interaction started.

The teenagers saw her coming and the short boy muttered something to which the girl wailed with exaggerated laughter.

‘Hello.’

Before she got any further, the short boy interrupted. ‘We’re not doing nothing.’

The girl cackled.

‘I’m not saying you have. I’m looking for someone. Someone you may know.’

‘Don’t know him. Or her.’ The short boy was the mouthpiece. The Tall boy hadn’t said a word and had hardly made any eye contact. The girl scrunched her face and stared at Sarah, making every effort to look intimidating. It wasn’t having the desired effect.

‘Shaved head. About your age, right forearm tattoo.’

‘Nope, nothing. Sorry love.’

‘Elbows’ got a tat like that.’ The tall boy spoke up. His friend backslapped him on the stomach.

‘What you sayin’ that for?’

‘We don’t owe him nothing, innit. What you protecting him for?’

‘No one talks to the pigs, though. Sorry, love. We just sort it out. Don’t involve ‘er.’ The short boy was getting a little irate, but wasn’t likely to kick off. The girl stayed quiet, just pulling faces at Sarah. Some scowls, some pouts. Sarah wasn’t quite sure the impression she was trying give, but she imagined she’d practiced all those looks in her bathroom mirror and had the selfies to prove it.

‘What’s your name?’ Sarah decided to focus on the tall boy as she wasn’t likely to get anywhere with the other two.

‘I don’t wanna say. Elbows is a mad bloke, seriously mad bloke. I don’t want him knowing anything about me.’

‘Coward. If you’re gonna tell ‘em, tell ‘em. Man up, go on.’

Sarah wanted to get the information and leave these two to bicker out their problems. ‘What’s his real name?’

The tall boy stayed quiet and looked at his friend, who shook his head.

‘You said you don’t owe him anything? What happened between you?’

‘He thinks he’s the big man. Throws his weight around everywhere. Beat on my little brother.’

‘Tell me where he is and he’ll stop being a problem.’

The short boy piped up again. ‘You lot aren’t going to do nothing. He’ll be in and out as usual.’

‘That’s it. I ain’t saying no more.’

THEY’D GIVEN her enough to go on. She walked back to the car and called in to the control room to request an intel check.

‘Hello, Control Room here.’

‘Hi, EH206, I need an intel check on my current assigned – serious assault on Pinders Road. Didn’t want to clog up the radio.’

‘Much obliged, it’s a busy afternoon out there. Go ahead.’

‘I’ve got a white male, say fourteen to sixteen years old. Shaved head, slim build. Nickname of Elbows. Distinctive mark, tattoo, on right forearm. Possibly been nicked for an assault on a boy from Glendale Estate.’

‘Okay, running it through. Hear the injury update from hospital? Early indications from the hospital suggest

possible fractured ribs. Some facial damage, but they're not how severe yet.'

'It looked that way at the scene. We couldn't get a coherent word out of him.' Sarah checked the car over for damage before getting in. She sat in the driver's seat and started the engine.

'One possible match. Tristan Sinden, white male, born '93 so sixteen years old. Tattoo on right forearm of a dragon design. No mention of an arrest for assault.'

'Address?' Her phone vibrated. Paul was calling from the hospital.

'46 Acre Avenue, Osbasten.'

'Thanks. Have to go, got another call coming through.' She pressed accept and changed lines.

'Paul?'

'Hi, Sarah. Chance of a lift? CID have arrived, so I'm all done up here.'

SARAH PULLED UP OUTSIDE ST. Jude's Hospital. An old man in a tweed jacket stood rattling a red charity box by the main entrance. His chubby cheeks and driver's cap reminded her of Norman Clegg from *Last of the Summer Wine*, a show her mother used to watch when she was growing up. She texted Paul to say she'd arrived, popped out of the car and put a pound in the old man's pot.

Paul walked out of A & E carrying large brown exhibit bags in both hands.

'I've seized all his clothing. His shirt was covered in blood by the time the paramedics arrived.' Paul put the bags in the boot.

'I've found a possible address. Spoke to some kids at the Glendale Estate who gave me a nod in the right direction.'

‘They’re not normally the sort to help out. Surprised you didn’t get told where to go.’

‘They weren’t particularly forthcoming, but piecing what they did give with intel records, we came up with 46 Acre Avenue as a possible address.’

‘Let’s drop these exhibits back at the nick and head over there.’

THREE

Acre Avenue was close to the Glendale Estate. Curtains twitched as Sarah parked outside number 46. By the time they got out of the car, some of the residents had already stepped into the street to see what was going on.

'EH206 to Control. Show us conducting an arrest attempt at 46 Acre Avenue in relation to our current.' Calling up and informing the controllers was an essential safety procedure. They were going in to arrest a juvenile for a serious offence, so hostility was to be expected, but the purpose of attendance didn't indicate the outcome. Sometimes the most innocent of door knocks turned into the most violent of encounters and, sometimes, suspects came quietly.

'Hear that?' Sarah heard something beyond the thin wooden door and put her ear to it before knocking. Paul shook his head and did the same. A muffled conversation could be heard, raised voices with no discernible words. There was a gated path on the left side of the house, and Sarah stood on her toes as best she could in her heavy-duty

boots and peered over the top. Paul looked for a gap in the drawn curtains to see into the front room.

Glass smashed and a scream followed. Sarah darted towards the front door; Paul already had his boot raised to kick it. The door already had damage to it where some unwelcome visitor, police or otherwise, had previously done the same. Paul slammed his boot into the door. It buckled, but kicks alone weren't going to break it. Sarah backed up to the gate and ran with all the speed she could gather into the door, caving it in and stumbling into the small hallway of the house.

Paul charged in behind her, running towards the rear of the house, while Sarah leant on the wall, winded. Running at a door like that wasn't an orthodox move and didn't work on all fixtures. Her shoulder throbbed and she breathed as deeply as she could through the pain in her chest.

'Police. Stay where you are.' Paul ran ahead into the kitchen and out of Sarah's line of vision. 'You. Don't move. Stay back. Stay back.'

Sarah needed to back up her colleague. As she stood straight, footsteps ran across the upstairs landing. A thud came from the kitchen, and a woman screamed.

'Get off him.'

'Stay back. Calm down. Calm down now.' Verbal commands in serious and violent situations became automatic. Verbal communication was the second stage of the conflict management model. The first, which was more often than not the most effective way to dissolve a confrontation, was officer presence. Most fights ended when a police officer showed up, but from what Sarah could hear coming from the kitchen, that wasn't the case this time.

The person upstairs ran down. He stopped at the bottom of the staircase, frozen as their eyes met.

‘Tristan?’ It was him. The boy with the chain. The boy who’d broken the jaw of a man over twice his age. The boy whose face was no longer one of raging violence, but that of a frightened child.

Tristan lunged over the fallen door and ran outside, pushing past two gawking neighbours that were peering in just beyond the gate. Sarah wanted to chase him, but she had to let him go again. She opened the kitchen door. Paul had his back to her, pushing a man’s head onto the work surface between the gas hobs and the sink. A woman in a white nightie, bleeding from the nose, barefoot and shaking, stood on the stone patio just outside the rear door.

Paul had a good grip. The man was grunting in between heavy breaths. His hairy belly, no doubt the product of the alcohol that the kitchen reeked of, hung out from under a dark grey T-shirt. Paul turned around as Sarah walked in the room, his face and hair soaking with sweat.

‘I’ve got him. Check on her.’

The woman backed off the moment she heard Paul’s direction. Sarah walked into the garden as the woman stepped off the patio slabs and onto the small lawn.

‘Hello. What’s your name?’

The woman curled her hands under her neck as if she was pulling up a comfort blanket, wanting to pull it right over her face and disappear. ‘Charlie.’

‘I’m Sarah.’ Sarah heard Roberts call up for assistance over the radio. One in custody for assault. ‘I’m here to help and find out what happened. You’re safe now, it’s okay.’

Charlie stopped moving and a realisation became clear on her face. ‘You’re not taking him, are you?’

‘He’s going to come with us. Then we’ll have some time to sit down and talk about what happened.’ Sarah turned around to check on Paul. The two men were in the same

position and weren't likely to be moving until assistance arrived. Her radio crackled in her ear – EH203 en route to assist, three minute ETA.

'You can't take him. Taking him makes it worse.' Charlie shook her head and dropped her hands to her sides.

Sarah held her hands up, an open-palmed peace offering. She'd trained for this. Open palms had been in the textbooks and on the PowerPoint presentations, in the practice sessions at the training centre and on the CCTV footage they'd shown displaying best confrontational practice. Of course, Charlie hadn't been a part of that training. She was real, she was here in front of Sarah and she wasn't about to play along.

'You're not taking him.' Her meek expression became an aggressive face as her head lowered and she charged forward into Sarah. Her slight body, clothed only in a flimsy nightie, collided with Sarah's stab vest and went no further. Sarah braced for the blow, but there really wasn't any need. Had Charlie wanted to get past her, had she wanted to get back into the house, she'd have tried to run around Sarah. The garden was wide enough to do it. Charlie thrust her arms over Sarah's shoulders and screamed back at the house.

'Leave him alone. Don't take him.' Charlie's cut lip bled onto her chin with the force of her scream. Sarah moved her head to the side, avoiding the saliva spray, but keeping a grip on Charlie's arm to prevent her rushing inside. EH203 would be there soon, and with Charlie's partner out of the way, Sarah would have a better chance of talking some sense into her.

'Charlie, he's going to come with us. Some time apart will help you think straight. How did you get that cut?'

'I'm not telling you anything.' Charlie was agitated, but

wasn't making any further moves to get back inside the house. Sarah supposed her screams were an attempt to let her partner know that none of this was her fault. She'd tried to stop him being arrested. Tried to stop them taking him away in the hope he wouldn't come home later and take it out on her.

'Control from EH203. Show us on scene at Acre Avenue.'

Sarah saw Paul stand the man up and walk him into the main hallway, ready for transport. Charlie saw it too and sobbed.

'Shall we get inside? You must be cold out here in just that.' Charlie nodded and Sarah walked behind her back into the house. The smell of booze and cat litter hit her the moment she walked in. Blood stained the white shine of the fridge door. It was the only blood in the room and, given how there was no sign of any near where Paul had held her partner, it must have come from Charlie's lip.

Paul came back into the kitchen, followed by two uniformed officers.

'Sarah. These two are going to take care of everything here. The Gov'nor wants us to stay on the GBH.'

Sarah nodded. 'Charlie, was that your son upstairs?'

'Yes. He stays quiet when Gavin's like this. Probably up there now scared for his life.'

That wasn't the impression Sarah had been given. The boy she'd seen on Pinders Road didn't seem the sort to fear for his life. The lads at the Glendale Estate hadn't thought so either.

'He's not upstairs. He ran out, just as we came in. What's his name?'

'Tristan. Keep him out of it. He's not likely to say much to you anyway.' Charlie wrapped her arms around her chest

and spoke the last two words under her breath. 'Hates police.'

'Any idea where he's likely to have gone?'

'Could be anywhere. He's got loads of mates around here.'

'We need to talk to him about something else. Tristan is the suspect in a serious assault that happened earlier today.'

Charlie rolled her eyes and opened a drawer. Sarah tensed up. Kitchens were like a domestic armoury; there wasn't much that couldn't be used as a weapon. Charlie took out a tobacco pouch, licked a Rizla paper and started rolling a cigarette on the table.

'The local kids are always making things up about him. He'll say the same. You're not going to nick him and all, are you?' Charlie looked beyond Sarah to Paul.

'We do have some questions for him. If you can tell us where he is, it'll be a lot easier for everyone.'

'He sometimes goes to the woods. Round the back of Glendale. Just stays there for hours, or that's what he says at least. Likes nature.' She scoffed and took a drag on the tiny cigarette.

'Okay, we're going to take a look up in his room before we go. That a problem?'

'Go right ahead, you won't find anything.'

FOUR

'This looks like the kid's room.' Sarah followed Paul upstairs and into the rear bedroom. The eggshell walls were bare and there was a hole below the window which looked like damage from a kick. The sweat-stained mattress lay on the floor, half-covered by a grey blanket. Clothes were piled up next to the PlayStation. A TV sat on top of a plank of white wood, which may have once been a bookshelf somewhere in the house. The open window did little to alleviate the room's overbearing smell of sweat.

'Stinks of a custody cell in here.' Paul gloved up and nodded at Sarah to do the same. She may have been new, but putting on gloves prior to searching a stranger's room wasn't something she needed to be prompted to do. Her twin daughters were still a few years from being teenagers and she hoped their room would never look like this. *Hopefully it's a boy thing.*

Sarah opened the wardrobe and a barely contained heap of clothes spilt out onto the floor. She picked up the clothes, starting with a red T-shirt and a pair of socks at the top, holding them both at arm's length.

‘Here’s the shirt he was wearing at the scene.’ She looked it over. ‘No obvious blood, but SOCO may be able to come up with something. Maybe sweat if there was a struggle before we arrived.’ She put it to one side, intending to take it when they left.

Paul lifted the mattress and looked underneath. ‘Nothing. Used to be that you’d always find some porn. Didn’t matter whose house you searched. Porn in the lad’s room, sometimes the dad’s room, and the ladies, the ladies always had a sex toy stashed somewhere. The Internet’s ruined all that.’

‘So it’s true. I have missed out on the golden era.’ Sarah looked above the hanging rail and saw the shiny metal chain. ‘Found it.’ She reached onto the shelf and took hold of the chain with the tips of her fingers, making as little contact as possible. ‘Looks like he’s wiped it clean.’

Paul checked the small bin by the mattress. He extended his baton and used it to move the Ginsters’ pasty wrapper and two beer cans that sat at the bottom. ‘No sign of a bloodied tissue in here.’

‘Bathroom?’

Sarah stayed in the bedroom while he popped out to take a look. She wondered about Tristan, wondered how he’d become the way he had. Intel had said he had a few brushes with the law and he had a reputation amongst the local lads. Seeing his home life added another piece to the puzzle. Tristan had to hear his mum being brutally attacked, and from what Charlie had said, it wasn’t the first time. His PlayStation controller rested on schoolbooks next to the TV. She put the chain down and picked up the top book – an orange maths exercise book – from the pile. Thumbing through, it was clear to see Tristan was a troubled student. The red letters ranged from A to E, going up

and down from week to week with no apparent pattern. The teacher's comments were in a similar vein – sometimes single words like 'Excellent', along with the occasional few sentences about Tristan needing to try harder and how his homework hadn't been to the high standard he was capable of. A few of the pages had the dreaded two-word comment Sarah recognised all too well from her own school days – 'See me.'

'I brought some bags up from the car. Nothing in the bathroom. No sign of blood at all.' Paul came back into the bedroom holding a handful of large brown paper exhibit bags. 'Find anything else?'

'Nothing evidential. Did find this maths book though. He seems like a bright boy, although his grades are all over the place.' She put the book down and picked up the one below it, his English book.

'What hope does he have living in a place like this?' Paul looked around for a clean, flat surface to put the exhibit bags on, but eventually settled for leaning them against the wall. He pulled out his pen and started writing the seizure details.

'He seems to do better at English. Fewer low grades at least.'

'They say you're either one or the other. I was always more mathsey. You?'

'English. I remember my English teacher accusing me of copying my stories. Upsetting at the time, but I've grown to see it as an endorsement of some latent creative streak.'

'And were they copied?'

'If I wanted to use my creativity for deviancy, I'd be on the other side of the law.'

Paul glanced at her over his shoulder and laughed. 'Sometimes I get a little creative in the kitchen. You know,

divert from the recipe. Add a little chilli here, a dusting of rosemary there.'

'A dusting of rosemary? I sometimes do art...things...I guess.' She was reluctant to talk about her screen prints. It was a hobby that had lingered since her university days. Her husband, Mark, had convinced her to put some of her work online and she'd reluctantly done so. She'd made the occasional sale, but whenever she mentioned it, people tended to assume she was some online entrepreneur raking in big money on the side, which wasn't likely to ever be the case.

Paul bagged and sealed the shirt and chain in separate bags.

'Done here?'

'Yeah. Let's find him. I think we should check out the woods.' Sarah held up the back inside cover of Tristan's English exercise book, where he'd drawn two stick people holding hands, walking along a path lined with trees.

FIVE

They parked on the road outside Holland Park and went through the tall metal gate on foot. Children played football whilst their parents lay on the grass nearby, and a jogger ran laps on the path that ran around the outskirts of the park. A play area, complete with swings, slide and a roundabout, was at the far end next to a muddy track that led into the wooded area behind the Glendale Estate.

The children waved at them and their parents turned to see who'd drawn their attention.

'You gotten used to that yet?' Paul's custodian hat made him seem comically tall. Policy stated they had to wear them at all times whilst on foot patrol, although not all officers did. Sarah suspected Paul was one of them, but had it on just to set a good example.

'People staring? I'm getting used to it.'

'It's not quite the same as turning heads in your Saturday night get-up.' Paul flashed a perusing glance at her body.

'My Saturday night get-up is frumpy pyjamas and my Tigger slippers.' *How'd you like that image?* Sarah

wasn't fussed about turning heads, and actually disliked being the centre of attention altogether. She'd made an effort in her younger days, but getting smashed on Bacardi and wearing a short dress with a plunging neckline was no longer on the agenda. Having Chinese with the family in front of *X-Factor* ticked all her boxes these days. 'I worry about kids like Tristan.'

'Worry about them?'

'How his life's going to turn out, given the start it's had.'

'Turn out? He's already started breaking jaws with metal chains. I think we know how things go from here. How he reacts to the process – being arrested, going through the courts – will determine his life. Will he learn from it and change things, or blame the rest of the world and become just another name on our books?'

'The rest of his world is that house. We've just seen his home life. Just that short glimpse was horrific enough. We get to leave it behind, move on to the next job. He doesn't. He has to go back and live that again and again.'

'And that allows him to taking a chain to someone's face? I'm not saying he's had the perfect upbringing, but he chose to break that fella's jaw earlier. He needs help, that's for sure, and I've no doubt social services will be made aware of the situation, if they're not already involved with the family.'

'I'm not talking about letting him off. I'm talking about understanding the situation as a whole.'

'And I'm talking about placing responsibility where it lies. Not all kids from broken homes grow up to be criminals. Some take the right path and some take the wrong path.' They walked past the empty play area and onto the dirt track into the woods. Mud squelched under Sarah's boots and the air felt cool and damp. They stopped.

‘Okay, this is bigger than I thought.’ The path snaked ahead with trees on either side. Sarah listened, but aside from the birds and the low hum of her radio couldn’t hear a thing. ‘Stay on the path?’

‘Makes sense. Nothing’s come over from the unit back at Acre Avenue; he’s not returned home.’

They walked along the path until the tall buildings of the Glendale Estate could be seen through the tree cover. The sound of rustling leaves and cracking twigs came from the right as someone ran towards them. Sarah turned to the face the direction of the noise as a familiar figure came into view, streaming with tears. The Glendale girl, no longer cackling or smirking, ran onto the path and, on seeing them, tried to sidestep around. Paul stretched his arm out in front of her.

‘Wait. What’s up?’

The girl looked at Sarah. ‘They’re beating him up over there. Go and do something.’

‘Where?’

‘Back in there.’ She pointed in the direction she’d just run from.

Paul let her go and they rushed into the woods.

SARAH’S PROTECTIVE GEAR – stab vest, baton, spray, cuffs – made it difficult to run at any great speed and was especially awkward when running through woods. She heard a boy’s voice shout in pain up ahead. She made it to the clearing with Paul following closely behind. Tristan lay on the ground curled into a foetal position, whilst the tall boy drove a swift kick into his stomach.

‘That’s what you get, you mug.’ The short boy was

dancing like a boxer, shouting and watching the tall boy lay into him. 'Messing with my family.'

Paul shoved the tall boy. He stumbled but managed to stay on his feet, and Paul grabbed his wrist and pulled him close to control his body. Sarah took hold of the short boy's arm and spun him around, striking the back of his arm with the blade of her hand and bringing him face first into the mud.

'Stay down.' She pulled his arm up ninety degrees to the floor, and twisted his wrist into a gooseneck lock. It stopped his body from moving, but unfortunately not his mouth.

'Oi, was this? Get off me.'

Paul had the tall boy cuffed on the ground Tristan tried to get to his feet, but after two attempts stayed down clutching his stomach. Sarah pressed the call button on her radio.

'Control from EH206.'

'206, go ahead.'

'206, two in custody at the Glendale Estate, near the path in the woods. Can we have two units to back up? Paramedics for injured male. Sixteen years old, conscious and breathing.'

'Control to EH units. Call for assistance Glendale Estate?'

'EH207, two minutes.'

'EH205, en route ten minutes out.'

Tristan opened his eyes and saw Sarah. He rolled onto his knees, one hand holding his stomach and the other supporting his body. He started crawling away and built the momentum to stand up.

'Tristan, wait. An ambulance is coming to look you over.' The short boy tried to raise his head and look. Sarah

pressed his wrist down further before he could open his mouth. Tristan's walk was building to an awkward stumble as he made his way towards the path.

'Where is she? I need to find her.'

The tall boy was cuffed; Paul couldn't leave him unattended. Sarah looked at him and he nodded for her to follow Tristan. Leaving him unassisted with one in custody wasn't the safest move and she'd decided against it back on Acre Avenue. This time the risk wasn't about losing a suspect. They knew Tristan's address and they'd seized the evidence they were looking for. This was about letting an injured boy walk away and fail to get treatment that may save his life. The tall boy's kicks had been brutal, and there was no telling what internal damage had been done. Letting him wander off into the woods could mean he didn't make it out the other side alive. Sarah pulled the short boy up, pulled his arms around a tree behind him and cuffed him to it.

'What? What are you doing?'

It wasn't strictly allowed, but she could justify it given the circumstance. Sarah ran after Tristan and caught up with him on the muddy path.

'Tristan, wait.' She approached him from behind.

'You're not nicking me. I'm not going inside.' He was bent over and out of breath, leaning on a tree for support.

'First things first. There's an ambulance on the way. You need to get your injuries looked at.'

'It's fine. I'm fine. Just get away from me.' He pushed himself off the tree with the palm of his hand and kept walking.

Sarah walked around him, blocking his path. 'I'm not letting you go anywhere. You need to get looked at and, you're right, you have questions to answer.'

'It's not what you think. He had it coming.'

'You could have killed him.'

'Good.' Recalling the incident gave him the same venom in his eyes that he'd had back on Pinders Road.

He stepped towards her. Sarah didn't move.

'Why were those kids beating you?'

'I don't know. Just did, I guess. I suppose you want to know what I did to deserve it? Like getting beaten up is my fault?'

'I didn't say that. I spoke to them earlier. They said you'd attacked someone's kid brother. Is that what this fight was over?'

'Something like that.'

'I was at your house earlier. I met your mum.'

'Yeah, I saw you.'

Sarah waited for him to ask how she was, ask anything at all, but he didn't. 'She's fine. A cut lip, but no permanent damage. On the outside, at least.'

'I know. He'll beat her. She'll make a big speech about staying away, and then she'll take him back. Then he'll move back in. Won't be the last time either.'

Her radio buzzed with a direct call from Paul. 'You okay?'

'All fine here. Back on the path with Tristan.'

Sarah appreciated the welfare check. 'We brought your dad in. He'll be questioned and we'll do our best to convince your mum to provide a statement. And, at some point, I'd like to take one from you too. Both about what happened at home today and the history of it all.'

'He's not my dad.' He'd caught her out in her assumption.

'Your mum's partner.'

'My dad is in hospital with a broken jaw.'

'The man from this afternoon was your dad?'

‘Shouldn’t have left. Shouldn’t have walked out on us, then none of this would have happened. I know you’re taking me in, you’re gonna lock me up like what happened to him.’

‘Your father went to prison?’

‘You lot took him in for nothing, that’s how mum got with Gavin. And that’s how all this started.’

Sarah heard a car pull up at the end of the path and looked over Tristan’s shoulder to see a police unit and a paramedic van slow to a halt. Tristan turned around.

‘I guess I’m about to go the same way.’

‘Who was the girl who ran out of here?’

‘My girlfriend. Won’t be seeing much of her, I expect.’ He winced from the pain in his stomach.

‘The stick girl? In your school book?’

‘You saw that? Nice.’ He looked away in shy embarrassment. ‘We used to come here. It’s where we ... you know.’

‘You don’t have to be shy, I’ve heard all the terms for it.’

Tristan reached into his right pocket, took out his phone and swiped open his Instagram account. ‘Here she is.’

It was the girl from Glendale Estate, with one hand on her exposed belly and the other holding a positive pregnancy test up to the camera.

‘She’s pregnant? How far?’

‘A month or so.’

‘Do her parents know?’

‘No.’

‘Tristan, you guys need to have a conversation about this. Her parents need to know. She needs help and advice. She may need medical care and the people around her need to know she’s with child.’

‘I know, I know all that. Not that it matters now as I ain’t gonna have nothing to do with the kid anyway.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘You gonna let me go.’ His face brightened with hope. ‘Seriously, if you let me go, I’ll take her and get out of town. I mean it. You won’t see me round here again.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Course it is. Tell ‘em I gave you the slip. Otherwise I ain’t gonna be there for my kid, just like my dad never was. He’ll grow up just like me. I want better for him, you know.’

‘That’s not true. Life’s about choices and consequences. Today you made a bad one. You’re going to have to face up to that. There’s no escaping it.’

The officers walked towards them on the path.

‘Through there, two in custody.’ They made their way through the woods towards where Paul had the two boys cuffed.

‘It’s time we got that looked at.’ Sarah put her arm on his shoulder and walked beside him back to the ambulance. The paramedic opened the back door and Tristan stepped inside. Sarah got into the back with him and texted Paul to meet her at the hospital.

SIX

Tristan was wheeled straight through to A & E for assessment, while Sarah and Paul went to the reception desk. Two other people sat in the waiting room, an elderly lady with a bandaged leg and a young man holding his passport. It was the quietest Sarah had ever seen it, but then the only other times she'd been here in uniform was after splitting up drunken brawls on Saturday nights.

'The boy I just brought in, Tristan Sinden, his dad was a victim of assault earlier. Could you check what ward he's in for me, please?' Sarah wanted the staff to know the situation. Putting Tristan in the same ward as his father could have disastrous consequences.

'What's the name?' The receptionist tapped on his keyboard. 'I'll see if I can find him.'

She waved Paul over. 'What's his name?' Tristan's father hadn't been able to speak at the scene, and in the rush of the afternoon, she hadn't thought to ask.

Paul pulled out his notebook from his back pocket. 'Greg Baines. Date of birth ... twelve, four, seventy-seven. That's from his driving licence.'

‘Got it. There he is, Esther ward. Would you like him notified?’

‘No, quite the opposite in fact. Tristan’s the one who attacked him. If he has to go to a ward, they’ll need to be kept separate.’

‘Sounds like a happy family.’

‘Par for the course.’ Paul laughed and the receptionist rolled his eyes.

‘We see it all in our professions.’

‘We sure do. We’re going to pop outside for a fag. Could you let us know any updates on the lad?’ Paul reached inside his stab vest pocket and took out a scrunched packet of cigarettes.

PAUL TRIED to blow the smoke away from Sarah, but a gust of wind had other ideas. The smell reminded Sarah of the top deck of buses. Smoking on the top deck had been acceptable back when Sarah was at school and had given it a permanent grey haze and the persistent din of coughing. When the dangers of passive smoking had become common knowledge, the top deck of the bus was taken over by the tough kids, who sat at the back and stared at her if she ever had to find a seat up there on the way back from school.

‘Don’t smoke? Good. These things will kill you. Not to mention the cost.’

‘Never touched them.’

‘Drink then?’

‘I like an occasional glass of red.’ Sarah’s glassware consisted of dusty champagne flutes, modest wine glasses for guests, and a special one-off piece, effectively a glass bowl on a translucent stick, for her.

Paul's radio buzzed with an incoming call. 'PC Roberts, go ahead.' He unplugged his earpiece so Sarah could hear the call.

'We've just finished up at Acre Avenue. Charlie's not willing to provide a statement. She let SOCO swab the blood in the kitchen and take photos of the cut on her lip, but what good it's going to do without her statement, I don't know.'

'Can't say I'm surprised. Thanks for letting us know.' Paul hung up the call. 'He'll be released later and we'll be back there by morning.'

'And Tristan goes through the same thing.'

'Unless his dad has the balls to prosecute. A few years indoors at this stage in his life might do him some good.'

'The balls to prosecute his own son? That's hardly an act of bravery. He needs help, support, he needs to know what options are available to him and shown that there's an alternative life out there.'

'Sarah, it's the only way he's going to learn. A short, sharp shock is just what he needs.'

'A stint in prison only moves him from one toxic environment to another.'

Times had changed for the police. Multi-agency partnerships, working closely with other organisations like social services, had benefited from more than just information sharing. But the shift from one single, towering institution keeping the bandits from the door to being a part of a joint approach took a change in attitude that hadn't yet filtered through the entire organisation. Change in policy was one thing; change in mentality was quite another. A greater understanding of the causes of deviant behaviour had reduced the police from owning the armoury to being a

single, albeit potent, weapon hanging side by side with a range of other approaches. Some would say they were now blunt and defunct; others that they were sharper than ever.

The receptionist came outside and waved the smoke away from his face.

‘You can talk to Mr. Baines now.’

Paul and Sarah followed the signs through A & E and up to Esther ward on the fourth floor. Flustered nurses in blue scrubs walked the corridors holding clipboards, disposable gloves and masks pushed silver food trolleys into the ward rooms. Visitors sat by patients’ beds and spoke to exhausted looking doctors. Esther ward had a fusty hospital smell, which reminded Sarah of being dragged in for checkups as a child. Mr. Baines was in the furthest room on the left. He turned his head and smiled as best he could as they walked in.

‘Mr. Baines?’ Sarah was conscious that everyone in the ward, two elderly women lying on their own and a family of four gathered around a young boy, would have one ear on the conversation. Mr. Baines winced and pushed his palms into his thin mattress in a failed effort to sit up. ‘Don’t make yourself uncomfortable on our part.’

The pain on his face was clear and he nodded down to his ribs before lying down again.

‘I’d like to thank you both. I know I was a bit of an arse earlier. I’ve got a long history with you lot, and most of it’s not pleasant.’

‘It’s not a problem, sir. What have the doctors said?’ Paul took his notebook out, ready for the update.

‘Two cracked ribs. The head shot glanced off my jaw. Stings like a bitch, but nothing permanent. If you hadn’t come when you did, I doubt we’d even be talking.’ His jaw

had swollen and he moved it only as much as he needed to in order to get his words out.

‘Your son is downstairs in A & E. He was in a fight by the time we caught up with him.’

‘What happened? He okay?’

‘He’ll be fine. Just a scrap with some local lads. What was the name of the doctor who spoke to you?’

Mr. Baines shook his head. ‘I can’t remember. It’s on the chart.’

Paul walked to the end of the bed and jotted down the name from the clipboard. ‘We need to talk about where we go from here. Tristan’s already admitted the offence, something I’m sure he’ll do again when he’s formally interviewed. If you’re willing to provide a statement, CPS will likely charge him.’

‘He could do with a hard lesson. Lord knows he’s not got anyone at home who’ll teach him anything. It’s a tough call, he’s my son after all.’ Mr. Baines glanced at the young boy across the ward surrounded by his family. ‘What d’you think’s best?’ He looked at Paul and then at Sarah.

Paul spoke for both of them before Sarah had a chance to reply. ‘He’s hospitalised you and has been in a fight which has landed himself in A & E. We need to intervene and stop this continuing. It’s a difficult decision, it’s your son after all, but sometimes these things need to be tackled early before any serious damage is done.’

Mr. Baines paused for a moment. ‘You’re right.’

Sarah wanted to step in. Paul was leading Mr. Baines down a path that’d only keep the cycle going. Mr. Baines was right, Tristan may well have killed him had they not arrived in time, but she didn’t agree incarceration was the best way forward. And what of Tristan’s own child? Would

another young life growing up with a parent in prison turn out the same way?

‘Mr. Baines, it may be worth waiting before making your decision. Everything’s still fresh, tensions are high. You may think differently about assisting a prosecution once the dust has settled.’

Paul gave her a look from the end of the bed. Sarah felt it was the right thing to do. It wasn’t her place to tell Mr. Baines he was about to be a grandfather, but she felt if he knew, he’d want to keep his son from walking the same path he had. The criminal justice system worked in a lot of situations, but Sarah didn’t feel this was one of them.

‘Like what?’ Mr. Baines appeared interested, but his smirk suggested he wasn’t prepared to take anything she said too seriously.

‘Talking it through. Seeing things from his perspective may help heal the wounds that led to all this. We have contact details for a range of family services, many of whom offer free advice and support that may be able to help.’

His face let her know she was fighting a losing battle before he opened his mouth to speak. ‘He’s not the type to talk. Some people only speak one language, and I’m ashamed to say he’s turned out to be one of them.’

Paul stood beside Sarah and gave her a subtle nudge. ‘We’ll leave you to get some rest now, sir. Your case will be referred to CID and a detective will be in touch shortly to take your statement.’

‘SARAH, you can’t go about doing that.’ Paul pressed the button and they waited for the lift down to the car park.

‘Do what? He doesn’t have to provide a statement. I was just telling him his options.’

‘And how would it have sounded to the Gov’nor back at the nick? Sorry, Gov, he wanted us to charge him, but I convinced him a few hugs would sort it all out. That’s not gonna wash. It’s a public place violent crime, a top priority for the department. We can’t leave it undetected.’

‘It’s not about stats. I’m not suggesting a few father-son moments will sort it out and you know it. Healing their problems will take a lot of hard work. I don’t think Tristan going inside is best for his baby, and neither would Mr. Baines if he knew he had a grandson on the way.’

‘It is about stats. Whatever you thought you’d be when you applied, this is the job you signed up for. Do I agree with it? No. But I know who pays my bills every month. We’re not moral guardians, Sarah. We keep the peace and we gather evidence, the other decisions rest with other people. Whether victims do or don’t want to assist prosecutions is none of our business. We ask, we try to convince them to, and we accept their decision. One thing I’ve never heard of is a police officer trying to convince someone not to pursue justice.’

‘That depends on what you call justice.’ Paul was right on one thing, policing priorities were decided on statistics. Sarah had been given her weekly targets during her first briefing at the nick: five detections, three traffic stops and three arrests, for starters. And with promotions based on detected crimes across the district, senior officers applied constant pressure to frontline officers to tick those boxes. ‘I think he’ll change his mind when he hears the news.’

‘Sarah, I understand what you’re saying. And, if he changes his mind, he changes his mind. One thing that won’t be changing anytime soon is how we work. This isn’t training school. There aren’t any cosy role-play scenarios that wrap up with nice, neat happy endings. You’re not

always going to get the results you want, which makes it all the more satisfying when you do.'

The lift pinged as the doors opened. Sarah wasn't sure if he was labouring the point for the benefit of her learning, or he was being patronising on purpose.

Paul walked into the lift first. 'Come on, kiddo. Let's get you back to the nick.'

<i>^Kiddo. That answers that one.</i>

MR. BAINES DIDN'T CHANGE his mind. Tristan admitted the offence. He was sentenced to a Detention and Training Order and held at a youth detention centre for twelve months. He was inside for the birth of his son, Davey. He spent his sentence planning for his release. His school provided textbooks and materials so he could keep up with his studies. He wasn't allowed to take any formal exams, but he didn't want to fall behind. The detention centre wardens helped him look at courses and programmes he'd be eligible for upon release. Still, he wasn't able to avoid the darker elements of prison life. He was bullied, beaten on occasion, more often than others for his desire to improve. But he got up, and the bruises toughened his resolve.

Sarah called him a week after his release. Response officers rushed from one job to the next, and rarely knew how each situation eventually panned out. Calling released suspects wasn't standard practice, but she was curious as to how he was doing. Tristan was in his bedroom back at 46 Acre Avenue. After firing numerous nervous questions at her regarding why she was calling, he settled down and filled her in on his time inside. He put the phone to his son's mouth and Sarah heard a soft gurgling sound. Before

Tristan could affirm his commitment to his boy having a better start in life than he'd had, their call was cut short by the sound of glass smashing and screams from downstairs.

Sarah ended the call, picked up her car keys and went back to Acre Avenue hoping this would be the time that broke the cycle. For Tristan, for Charlie and for little Davey.

