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Detective Inspector Ray Stevens stood next to the window and contemplated his office chair, on which an arm had been broken for at least a year. Until now he had simply taken the pragmatic approach of not leaning on the left side, but while he was at lunch someone had scrawled ‘defective’ in black marker pen across the back of it. Ray wondered if Business Support’s newfound enthusiasm for equipment audits would extend to a replacement, or whether he was destined to run Bristol CID from a chair that cast serious doubts over his credibility.

Leaning forward to find a marker pen in his chaotic top drawer, Ray crouched down and changed the label to ‘detective’. The door to his office opened and he hastily stood up, replacing the lid on the pen.

‘Ah, Kate, I was just . . .’ He stopped, recognising the look on her face almost before he saw the Command and Control printout in her hand. ‘What have you got?’

‘A hit-and-run in Fishponds, guv. Five-year-old boy killed.’

Ray stretched out a hand for the piece of paper and scanned it, while Kate stood awkwardly in the doorway. Fresh from shift, she had only been on CID for a couple of months and was still finding her feet. She was good though: better than she knew.

‘No registration number?’

‘Not as far as we know. Shift have got the scene contained and the skipper’s taking a statement from the child’s mother as we speak. She’s badly in shock, as you can imagine.’

‘Are you all right to stay late?’ Ray asked, but Kate was nodding before he’d even finished the question. They exchanged half-smiles in mutual acknowledgement of the adrenalin rush it always felt so wrong to enjoy when something so horrific had happened.

‘Right then, let’s go.’

They nodded a greeting to the throng of smokers clustered under cover by the back door.

‘All right, Stumpy?’ Ray said. ‘I’m taking Kate out to the Fishponds hit-and-run. Can you get on to Area Intelligence and see if anything’s come in yet?’

‘Will do.’ The older man took a final drag of his roll-up. Detective Sergeant Jake Owen had been called Stumpy for so much of his career that it was always a surprise to hear his full name read out in court. A man of few words, Stumpy had more war stories than he chose to share, and was without a shadow of a doubt Ray’s best DS. The two men had been on shift together for several years, and with a strength that belied his small stature, Stumpy was a handy crewmate to have on your side.

In addition to Kate, Stumpy’s team included the steady Malcolm Johnson and young Dave Hillsdon, an enthusiastic but maverick DC, whose determined efforts to secure convictions sailed a little too close to the wind for Ray’s liking. Together they made a good team, and Kate was learning fast from them. She had a fiery passion that made Ray nostalgic for his days as a hungry DC, before seventeen years of bureaucracy had ground him down.

Kate drove the unmarked Corsa through mounting rush-hour traffic to Fishponds. She was an impatient driver; tutting when a red light held them back, and craning her neck to see past a hold-up. She was perpetually in motion: tapping fingers on the steering wheel, screwing up her nose, shifting in her seat. As

the traffic started moving again, she leaned forward as though the action would propel them along faster.

‘Missing blues and twos?’ Ray said.

Kate grinned. ‘Maybe a bit.’ There was eye-liner smudged around her eyes, but otherwise her face was clean of make-up. Dark brown curls fell messily about her face, despite the tortoise-shell clip presumably intended to hold them back.

Ray fished for his mobile to make the necessary calls, confirming that the Collision Investigation Unit was en route, the duty superintendent had been informed, and that someone had called out the Ops wagon – a lumbering vehicle stuffed to the gunnels with tenting, emergency lights and hot drinks. Everything had been done. In all honesty, he thought, it always had been, but as duty DI the buck stopped with him. There was usually a bit of hackle-rising from shift when CID turned up and started going over old ground, but that was just the way it had to be. They’d all been through it; even Ray, who had spent as little time in uniform as possible before moving on.

He spoke to Control Room to let them know they were five minutes away, but didn’t call home. Ray had taken to phoning Mags instead on the rare occasion when he was going to be on time, which seemed a much more practical approach to the long hours the job demanded of him.

As they rounded the corner Kate slowed the car to a crawl. Half a dozen police cars were strewn haphazardly down the street; lights throwing a blue glow across the scene every other second. Floodlights were mounted on metal tripods, their strong beams picking out the fine mist of rain, which had thankfully abated in the last hour.

Kate had stopped on their way out of the station to grab a coat and exchange her heels for wellies. ‘Practicality before style,’ she had laughed, throwing the shoes into her locker and pulling on the boots. Ray rarely gave much thought to either principle, but he wished now he’d at least brought a coat.

They parked the car a hundred metres away from a large white tent, erected in an attempt to protect from the rain whatever evidence might have been left. One side of the tent was open, and inside they could see a Crime Scene Investigator on her hands and knees, swabbing at something unseen. Further up the street a second paper-suited figure was examining one of the huge trees that lined the road.

As Ray and Kate drew near to the scene they were stopped by a young PC, his fluorescent jacket zipped so high Ray could barely make out a face between the peak of his hat and his collar.

‘Evening, sir. Do you need to see the scene? I’ll have to sign you in.’

‘No thank you,’ said Ray. ‘Can you tell me where your sergeant is?’

‘He’s at the mother’s house,’ the PC said. He pointed down the street to a row of small terraced houses, before retreating into his collar. ‘Number four,’ came the muffled afterthought.

‘God, that’s a miserable job,’ said Ray, as he and Kate walked away. ‘I remember doing a twelve-hour scene watch in the pouring rain when I was a probationer, then getting told off by the DCI for not smiling when he turned up at eight o’clock the next morning.’

Kate laughed. ‘Is that why you specialised?’

‘Not entirely,’ Ray said, ‘but it was certainly part of the appeal. No, it was mainly because I was sick of passing all the big jobs over to the specialists and never seeing anything through to the end. How about you?’

‘Sort of similar.’

They reached the row of houses the PC had pointed towards. Kate carried on talking as they looked for number four.

‘I like dealing with the more serious jobs. But mainly it’s because I get bored easily. I like complicated investigations that make my head hurt to figure them out. Cryptic crosswords rather than simple ones. Does that make sense?’

‘Perfect sense,’ said Ray. ‘Although I’ve always been useless at cryptic crosswords.’

‘There’s a knack,’ said Kate, ‘I’ll teach you sometime. Here we are, number four.’

The front door was smartly painted and slightly ajar. Ray pushed it open and called inside. ‘CID. All right if we come in?’

‘In the sitting room,’ came the response.

They wiped their feet and walked up the narrow hallway, pushing past an over-loaded coat rack, beneath which sat a pair of child’s red wellies, neatly placed beside an adult pair.

The child’s mother was sitting on a small sofa, her eyes fixed on the blue drawstring school bag clutched on her lap.

‘I’m Detective Inspector Ray Stevens. I’m so sorry to hear about your son.’

She looked up at him, twisting the drawstring so tightly around her hands the cord gouged red grooves in her skin. ‘Jacob,’ she said, dry-eyed. ‘His name is Jacob.’

Perched on a kitchen chair next to the sofa, a uniformed sergeant was balancing paperwork on his lap. Ray had seen him around the nick but didn’t know his name. He glanced at his badge.

‘Brian, would you mind taking Kate into the kitchen and filling her in on what you’ve got so far? I’d like to ask the witness a few questions, if that’s okay? It won’t take long. Perhaps you could make her a cup of tea at the same time.’

From the reaction on Brian’s face, it was clear this was the last thing he wanted to do, but he stood up and left the room with Kate, no doubt to moan to her about CID pulling rank. Ray didn’t dwell on it.

‘I’m sorry to ask you even more questions, but it’s vital we get as much information as we can, as early as possible.’

Jacob’s mother nodded, but didn’t look up.

‘I understand you couldn’t see the car’s number plate?’

‘It happened so quickly,’ she said, the words triggering a release of emotion. ‘He was talking about school, and then . . . I only let go for a second.’ She pulled the drawstring cord tighter round her hand, and Ray watched the colour drain from her fingers. ‘It was so fast. The car came so fast.’

She answered his questions quietly, giving no sign of the frustration she must surely be feeling. Ray hated causing such intrusion, but he had no choice.

‘What did the driver look like?’

‘I couldn’t see inside,’ she said.

‘Were there passengers?’

‘I couldn’t see inside the car,’ she repeated, her voice dull and wooden.

‘Right,’ said Ray. Where on earth were they going to start?

She looked at him. ‘Will you find him? The man who killed Jacob. Will you find him?’ Her voice cracked and the words fell apart, morphing into a low moan. She bent forward, hugging the school bag into her stomach, and Ray felt a tightening in his chest. He took a deep breath, forcing the feeling away.

‘We’ll do everything we can,’ he said, despising himself for the cliché.

Kate came back from the kitchen with Brian behind her, carrying a mug of tea. ‘All right if I finish this statement now, guv?’ he asked.

Stop upsetting my witness, you mean, Ray thought. ‘Yes, thank you – sorry for interrupting. Got everything we need, Kate?’

Kate nodded. She looked pale, and he wondered if Brian had said something to upset her. In a year or so he would know her as well as he knew the rest of the team, but he hadn’t quite sussed her out yet. She was outspoken, he knew that much, not too nervous to put her point across at team meetings, and she learned fast.

They left the house and walked in silence back to the car.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, although it was clear she wasn’t. Her jaw was rigid; the colour had completely drained from her face.

‘Fine,’ Kate said, but her voice was thick and Ray realised she was trying not to cry.

‘Hey,’ he said, reaching out and putting an awkward arm round her shoulder, ‘is it the job?’ Over the years Ray had built a defensive mechanism against the fall-out of cases like this one. Most police officers had one – it’s why you had to turn a blind eye to some of the jokes bandied about the canteen – but perhaps Kate was different.

She nodded and took a deep, juddering breath. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not normally like this, I promise. I’ve done dozens of death knocks, but . . . God, he was five years old! Apparently Jacob’s father never wanted anything to do with him, so it’s always been the two of them. I can’t imagine what she’s going through.’ Her voice cracked, and Ray felt the tightness in his chest return. His coping mechanism relied on focusing on the investigation – on the hard evidence before them – and not dwelling too deeply on the emotions of the people involved. If he thought too long about how it must feel to watch your child die in your arms, he would be no use to anyone, not least to Jacob and his mother. Ray’s thoughts flicked involuntarily to his own children, and he had an irrational desire to call home and check they were both safe.

‘Sorry.’ Kate swallowed and gave an embarrassed smile. ‘I promise I won’t always be like this.’

‘Hey, it’s okay,’ Ray said. ‘We’ve all been there.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Even you? I didn’t have you down as the sensitive type, boss.’

‘I have my moments.’ Ray squeezed her shoulder before taking his arm away. He didn’t think he’d ever actually shed tears at a job, but he’d come pretty close. ‘You going to be okay?’

‘I’ll be fine. Thank you.’

As they pulled away, Kate looked back at the scene, where the CSIs were still hard at work. 'What sort of bastard kills a five-year-old boy, then drives off?'

Ray didn't hesitate. 'That's exactly what we're going to find out.'