

Bone & Cane

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For James and Jane Urquhart

I

MARCH 1997

Members of Parliament can be many things. Campaigners. Law makers. Media personalities. Even detectives, of a rather public kind. One thing MPs can't be is shit-faced in public, especially in their own constituency. In the House, it was okay to let your hair down. When you were guest of honour at a very public party, it wasn't wise to be one drink away from legless. Sarah was well aware of this. But tonight she had a right to celebrate.

'Another?' The stocky man with the shaved head and fat neck had already planted two slobbery kisses on her lips. Sarah was determined to avoid a third.

'I'm going to take a pause,' she shouted. 'I've drunk enough already.'

Ed had been inside for several years, so he wouldn't be used to heavy social drinking. Yet he didn't look drunk, not as drunk as Sarah felt.

The PA blasted out 'Free Nelson Mandela'.

'Want a word,' he yelled over the music. 'Come outside for a minute.'

Ed had been given two life sentences for a double murder. The first victim was a police officer, Terry Shanks, who Ed had a grudge against. The second victim was the police officer's young wife, Liv. She had probably been raped before she was murdered, but Ed had not been charged with that.

Sarah, campaigning in a by-election that she wasn't expected to win, had made all sorts of promises to the voters. One of them was that, if elected, she would raise Ed's case in the House of Commons. She'd kept her promise, even helped found the campaign group that organized tonight's celebration. The more she found out about Ed's case, the more dodgy the conviction had looked, but his first application for appeal was turned down. This despite the only forensic connecting Ed to the scene – a hair on the carpet – being highly questionable.

Last year, Sarah had agreed to visit Clark in Nottingham Prison. She'd not been in a prison before, so arranged for the governor to show her round.

'You're the first politician we've had for a while,' he told her. 'We get the occasional judge or magistrate, but mainly it's out of sight, out of mind.'

Afterwards, the smell stayed with her for hours: stale, cooked cabbage, probably masking the stench of sweat and urine. She couldn't forget the wretched clothes of the men on the lifer's wing: cheap, worn-out rags that a charity shop would reject. Everything about the place made her question the justice system. It was so hopeless, so hateful. She expected prison to have taken its toll on Clark, but when they met, he was all smiles.

'You had a wander round then?'

'Just a short one.'

'I could tell by look on your face. It's grim. But you learn to get by.'

Ed was far more cheerful than ninety per cent of the people who attended her MP's surgeries. There was no swagger about him. He even took care to look at her face rather than her chest. He had fair hair then, which made him appear younger, softer.

'I've made lots of mistakes in my life, but a double murder weren't one of them,' he told her. 'Terry Shanks were one of theirs, so the police needed a result. I was the obvious suspect. But you'd have to be bloody stupid to kill the guy who put you inside only a couple of weeks after they released you.'

Sarah agreed that you would. Ed didn't come across in the least stupid. Inside, he told her, he'd taken A levels in Sociology, Economics

and Law, got good grades. He planned to start an Open University degree course.

'You've got to do something to take your mind off life inside. The time I did before was enough to make me go straight. I'd never risk them sending me back, no matter how much I wanted revenge. Anyway, I weren't bothered about getting back at Terry Shanks. He were only doing his job.'

Sarah believed Ed. The more she looked into the case, the more she thought that Clark's conviction was a classic miscarriage of justice. Strong emotions had overwhelmed both judge and jury, resulting in a flawed verdict.

That visit to Nottingham Prison was a turning point in Sarah's new parliamentary career. She had found an area that she wanted to focus on. She joined the Howard League for Penal Reform, began reading up on prisons, wrote to newspapers and the Director of Public Prosecutions, highlighted inconsistencies in the evidence that convicted Clark. The group she'd set up circulated a petition, organized a letter-writing campaign. At last, Ed was given leave to appeal. Yesterday lunchtime, Ed Clark's conviction had been quashed.

Sarah followed the freed man out of the ballroom. In the corridor, he squeezed her arse. Sarah didn't complain. Today, of all days, Ed could be excused for behaving badly. Sarah was aware that Ed fancied her. Some level of desire was the background hum to most of her relationships with straight men and she had become adept at avoiding unwanted advances. Her signals were only mixed if she intended them to be.

Once they were outside, the October breeze sobered her a little. There were other people on the balcony beyond the ballroom, but none within listening distance. Without warning, Ed gripped Sarah's left thigh with his large right hand. He leant into her right ear.

'You and me are going to celebrate in my room. Tonight.'

'That's very flattering,' Sarah began, then realized the line wasn't strong enough to deflect an ex-con the day after he'd got out. This evening, Ed's prison humility had been replaced by a brute arrogance.

‘There are a dozen women in there who’d go upstairs with me the moment I clicked my fingers. You’re the only one I want.’

His hand moved another inch up her thigh. It didn’t pinch. Nor did it faze her: alcohol helped that way. She might have found the firmness of Ed’s grasp exciting had it come from a man she fancied.

‘I’m sorry, Ed. I have a boyfriend.’

‘I don’t give a shit,’ Ed whispered, hand stretching to the panty line. ‘You want me too. I know what makes you tick. When you visited me inside, I could see you thinking, *I hope he’s innocent, because I really want to fuck him.*’

‘You’ve got it wrong. I helped you because you’re one of my constituents, nothing more. Now I have to go.’

She pulled away.

‘My room’s number seven, when you change your mind.’

Ed wasn’t a bad bloke. He was a randy, working class lad with a home-made tattoo on one arm and a hard-on for his local MP. Sarah empathised. When you’d served four and a half years for a crime you didn’t commit, you were desperate to get your end away. But she’d never succumbed to doling out a sympathy shag, not even with men she fancied. Not even when pissed.

Tonight, Ed had handled rejection well, all things considered. She’d had to fight off more assertive approaches from half a dozen of her fellow MPs. But now it was time to leave. Sarah hurried past several couples and found herself in the corridor behind the back of the over-lit ballroom. She’d noticed a public phone booth somewhere round here.

Not this corridor. One of these days, she would get herself a mobile phone. She took a turn at the end, noting that the fleur-de-lys pattern in the pale purple carpet was starting to move about. That was what came of letting people buy you doubles. There the booth was, next to Reception, where Ed Clark was getting his key from the desk. Sarah ducked into the phone booth, out of sight.

Dan answered on the tenth ring.

‘Tell me you haven’t had a drink.’

‘I haven’t had a drink. Sounds like you have, though.’

‘Is it that obvious? Look, I could really stand being rescued. If you turn up, we could make a graceful exit. And I’d owe you one.’

‘Did you remember to have anything to eat?’

‘Finger food.’

‘And you wonder why you’re drunk. Where are you?’ She named the hotel. ‘Twenty minutes. But don’t make me hang around. I was about to turn in.’

Sarah stepped out of the booth and tried to work out the quickest route back to the ballroom. Maybe she should freshen up first. Had she passed a bathroom? There was bound to be one by Reception. Sarah looked down the hall to make sure Ed had gone.

‘Sarah!’

Ed was coming out of his room, key in hand. Before she could head him off, he was upon her, an arm hooking beneath her elbow, as if to hold her up, then locking around her waist.

‘Glad I found you, duck. I knew you’d change your mind. Sorry about before. I shouldn’t have tried it on in public like that.’

He steered Sarah towards his room. The door hung open. She’d made a real pig’s ear of this. They were within earshot of Reception. News of any incident would be all over the party in minutes. Would it be easier to go into Ed’s ground floor room, sort it out there? Ed pushed her inside and the decision became irrelevant. Number seven. She’d have noticed it when walking past if she hadn’t been so slaughtered.

‘Don’t close the door.’

He ignored her. At least he didn’t lock it. There was a glazed look in his eyes that hadn’t been there minutes earlier. Sarah realized he’d taken something. There, on the dressing table, was a tell-tale white trail.

‘I was ringing my boyfriend. He’s coming to collect me. I’m sorry, Ed. I thought I made myself clear.’

‘We’d best be quick, then.’

He let go of her, had his hand on the buckle of his jeans. Now was the time to act. Still, Sarah hesitated. She was due to make two public appearances with Ed in the next week. He unzipped his flies.

‘Ed, it’s not going to happen. I’ve got to go.’

He grabbed her by both buttocks and pulled her towards him. This was getting out of hand. Sarah wished she hadn’t worn a dress. He was a sweaty animal, his erection digging into her waist.

‘Ed, that’s enough.’

He knocked her to the floor. Before she could react further, he clicked shut the lock on the hotel door and began to pull down his jeans. He got one leg off and she tried to get up, but he put a foot on her stomach, pressing her back down. In a moment of clarity, Sarah saw that she would have only one chance to fend him off. He lifted his foot in order to finish pulling off his jeans. She moaned and turned onto her left side.

He gave a growl of arousal and began to lower himself onto her. Sarah pulled back her right leg.

‘Stop!’ she said again.

Ed held himself up with his left arm. With his right he tried to push Sarah onto her back. This was it. Sarah let her shoulder fall. He thought she was succumbing. Then, instead of rolling onto her back, she thrust her right knee into his groin.

Ed yelled and rolled off her, cursing. Sarah got to her feet. Her best green dress was ripped, she realized. Time to unlock the door. What did you do? Press? No, turn. Or maybe that thing on the side? Too late. Ed grabbed her ankles, pulling her down. Sarah lost balance and slipped. She landed hard on the matt green carpet. Her face was next to his. His eyes had watered from the pain, but he was grinning. How long before he recovered sufficiently to start again?

‘I’ll scream,’ she told him. ‘Someone will come. You don’t want that.’

It was the stuff he’d taken, she told herself: coke, speed, some shitty street drug . . . With one hand he held her down, scratching her thigh with the other as he ripped her knickers down her legs. For a moment, he stared at her pubic hair. Next, he bunched her knickers in his right hand and held them to his nose.

‘Frightened cunt,’ he whispered in her ear. ‘Lovely.’

Then he let go. It was as if that was all he’d wanted. Sarah stood quickly, put on her shoes. Ed sat up, legs apart, still in pain. This

time, she remembered how to open the door – press in the switch on the side, turn the knob to the left. Ed began to speak softly.

‘I did it, you know. Killed him and fucked her. She enjoyed it, I can tell you. Same way you’d enjoy it if you let yourself. Ashamed how much she enjoyed it, with hubby dead in the corner. Begged me to kill her too. So I did.’

The smile on his face was smug, rather than demented. Sarah couldn’t read him well enough to know if he was telling the truth.

‘I’m going to pretend none of this happened,’ she said, in her MP’s voice, like that put her in control. ‘But I don’t want to see you again. The rest of the week, the media stuff, don’t show up. Call in ill or I’ll have you arrested for assault.’

He lifted her knickers to his nose and sniffed them again. Sarah hurried down the corridor, out through Reception, into the chilly car park. She stood in the cool and collected herself. Then she hurried back in, used the bathroom and returned to the ballroom for her bag. She told the chair of the Campaign Committee that, sorry, she was exhausted and had to leave: no fuss please. There were no comments about the small rip in the side of her dress.

Ten minutes or so passed before Dan found her, waiting in the car park, holding her dress down over her cold bum. He didn’t notice that she was shivering, but kissed her on the cheek.

‘Quick getaway for once, huh?’

She nodded. During the drive home, Sarah only managed a couple of words, but if Dan made anything of this, he took it as drunken tiredness. They didn’t talk as much as they used to, weren’t as interested in each other’s lives as partners ought to be. That was one of the reasons why, only a few days ago, they had tentatively agreed to split up. Neither of them could be bothered to try.

As soon as they got in, Sarah showered. In bed, when Sarah didn’t respond to his caress, Dan turned over. Within minutes, he was snoring. Sarah lay awake, thinking about Ed Clark’s confession to double murder. She tried to convince herself that he was only winding her up.