

TO DIE FOR

COLIN WARD

Prologue

His heart pounded as he ran faster than his legs could keep up with, momentum and gravity doing most of the work. The beast that was trying to escape through his chest also clawed at the insides of his head. His mouth was sandpaper dry and his nose scorched by the cold air.

The darkness was broken only by slivers of light that were barely enough to make out the branches and trunks that snatched, scraped, and sliced his arms as he battled through. His footfall only just managed to keep within the limits of a thin track. No choice but to follow it.

But then it vanished.

He felt a sudden sensation of turning, twisting weightlessness, followed by a crushing blow to his side.

His breath vanished in a single mighty gasp. Something in the darkness, a hidden trap, had brought him crashing down, but he had to get up and keep going. He had to keep running.

He'd stopped breathing for long enough to hear that the voices all around were still chasing. A beam of light cut through the darkness like a lightsabre, dancing for a moment, and then vanishing as fast as it had appeared.

Scrambling, falling from one foot to the next, over and over, stabbed by the rough surface, he continued his escape through the woods and down a slope. The adrenaline was rushing and pain had yet to set in, so he kept going.

The noise of his heavy, rasping breathing and the pounding drum of his heart were masking the chasing voices again.

He had to keep going.

The pitch-black fingers and arms of trees began to spread out and reach higher into the sky. Thicker bushes clawed away at the skin of his arms. Adjusting to the changes in light, his eyes began to make out more shapes: short, fat buildings like houses; a road, perhaps; fences and lampposts. There was no time to stop, and barely enough time to turn and look for pursuers.

It took one final push to break through the edge of the woodland. The last bush scratched viciously at all the exposed skin on his arms and legs, etching lines of heat through his body, as if the woods were trying to drag him back.

Within an instant, the icy wind hit his face. The chase was still close behind, and although his instinct had been to run, his body now cried out to stop for just a few moments.

Scanning the open ground as quickly as possible, he could just about make out metal shards, wooden panels, and wire fencing. It looked like the kind of ground that in daylight promised great adventure, but at that moment gave him a chance to hide.

Battling through a small, low twist in the fence, he crawled across and found refuge behind a pair of rusted steel barrels. He followed a split-second thought to move a few pieces of wood, hiding himself from view, before the voices caught up.

And then he just sat.

Listened.

The voices seemed some distance away: they'd taken a different winding path through the trees. He managed to take a few deep breaths. Slow and forced. His muscles began to tighten...

...and the pain set in.

He tried not to cry out, knowing that he couldn't afford to be discovered. So, he bit down on the pain and clenched his fists.

That's when he felt the oozing wetness trapped between his fingers.

As he looked down in the faint, cold moonlight, he saw the dark crimson blood covering his ten-year-old hands.

Chapter 1

DI Mike Stone had not managed to muster up a good mood on the way back to the Steelhouse Lane station. He had no intention of wasting much time on questioning the one man they'd managed to round up out of the three who had been involved in a violent shop robbery earlier. Nothing over the police radio had sounded very positive about catching either of the other two suspects – whoever they were – so it looked like the beginning of a long night of shrugged shoulders and 'no comments' typical of the average low-life Birmingham criminal.

At least this one's thick enough to possibly slip up.

Stone made his way through to the custody suite at the rear of the station and nodded a 'hello' to the custody sergeant, who stood judge-like behind the high counter.

The sergeant recognised Stone's long leather coat instantly. It hung heavily over the stocky inspector: aged and well-worn, with layers of wrinkles that spoke more of its quality than cheapness, and spoke even more of its constant use. It was as if the mahogany brown coat carried as much of a reputation as its wearer.

Who was equally well-worn.

'What brings you here, Mike?' the sergeant sniggered. 'Your demotion finally come good?'

'Shut it, sergeant,' Stone replied, holding out an expectant hand.

'What you here for, then?'

'Holding DS Sharp's hand on this Wigfield robbery.'

The sergeant was genuinely surprised. It wasn't often that the esteemed Stone of the Force CID, Specialist Aston team, would be sent to deal with a mere robbery case.

'You been a naughty boy, Mike? Or are you just here to piss in my bathtub?' The sergeant passed him the file without any qualms and leaned over onto his counter as if to get close enough to share a whispered gossip.

Sergeant Steve 'The Bear' Graves was a bony figure with inordinately hairy forearms that seem to jut out of his starch-stiff short-sleeve shirt. He was in his mid-forties – a real 'career-copper', not easily fazed by the more intimidating inspectors like Mike Stone. He had a certainty about his nature, a confidence that Stone respected.

And he was good at his job: which Stone respected above all else.

‘I’ve no bloody idea why I’m here,’ Stone replied, flicking through the file, scanning the notes with as much interest as a teenager checking for homework. ‘Barry-fucking-Wigfield.’

‘The one and only.’

‘What’s his game, then? Robbery’s not his usual trade.’

‘Sir?’

‘He’s too thick to make a decent job of it.’

‘Maybe he’s gone up in the world,’ the sergeant quipped with layers of sarcasm.

Stone took a few moments to look over the notes and paused on one phrase. His head tilted to the side as if he was listening to a voice whispering over his shoulder.

‘The thing is, Steve,’ he began, almost speaking to himself, ‘Barry Wigfield is a low-life scumbag. He steals handbags from grannies, mobiles from kids, gets involved in the odd scuffle – shit, the worst he’s ever been nicked for was car theft.’

‘They’ve all gotta start somewhere.’ The sergeant’s Brummie accent began to thicken, and he scratched at his thinning dark grey hair, not sure he cared too much about Barry Wigfield’s criminal record, but intrigued at the idea that something was ticking in the DI’s head.

‘Start, yes,’ Stone continued. ‘But stepping up a gear to an armed robbery – and a vicious one at that – usually has something, or *someone* else behind it.’

‘How’s the old man? The shopkeep: he gonna live?’

‘Well, he’s not going to die. As for *living* after this attack: that’s a whole other question.’

Stone had been given a short briefing by the chief superintendent on his way over to the city centre station, which had included quite a detailed description of the attack and some photos from the SOCO team that showed the job had been more than a mere robbery. Three men in balaclavas doing over a shop in broad daylight, and the one they'd caught had taken his time over scaring the hell out of the 58-year-old Asian shopkeeper. The attack didn't even carry any of the trademark race-hate crime factors, either.

Stone handed the file back to the sergeant and made his way to the interview room to catch up on progress. Something niggled at him. He didn't often work robbery cases any more. As one of the DIs for the specialist Force CID team at Aston, he mainly led serious cases such as murder, rape, or organised crimes and large drugs cases. But a simple shop robbery on a Friday afternoon was not normally on his radar.

Unless there was more to it that hadn't yet been mentioned.

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'Come on, Barry,' whined Sharp, 'this is going to be a lot easier on all of us if you actually answer some of our questions.'

'No comment.' The scrawny-looking man had no hair, sunken eyes, and a complexion that made a zombie look well-pampered. He was a well-known petty criminal who'd been on the wrong side of the police since before his

conception. Not the sharpest tool in the box, he tended to fall from crime to crime, trip over opportunities, and be about as artful at life as the cheap tattoos on his arms.

Stone stood in the corner of the square interview room with his hands in his pockets. It was more a statement of lethargy than defiance. Stone would never be a nine-to-five office job man, but this Friday was dragging.

Sharp, on the other hand, was a cocky little upstart who didn't deserve to be a sergeant. He didn't really deserve to be a copper, in Stone's eyes. He sat opposite Barry Wigfield, leaning back in his chair with his arms folded and his legs straight, crossed over only at the ankles. It was if he was trying to 'plank' the chair at an angle.

'You were caught running from the scene,' Sharp continued.

'No comment,' Barry sneered, digging his elbow into the arm of his solicitor.

Mr Arnold Schaeffer was a duty solicitor who seemed to pride himself on getting in the way of anything the police were trying to achieve. He was fat and overpaid, and everyone assumed the two were connected. His grey-beige suit crumpled under the awkwardness of his size and did nothing to hide the sweat patches under his arms or around the fat of his neck. He was, in every way, a grotesque man.

'You were covered in the victim's blood, for Christ's sake!' Sharp was getting closer to shouting.

Schaeffer perked up. 'There is no need to begin intimidating my client, detective.'

Sharp glared at him. ‘Your *client* has no problem with intimidation, thank you. You should see the look of Mr Patel.’

‘My client has already made it clear that he attempted to help Mr Patel in what appeared to have been a distressing incident.’

‘Yeah.’ Barry joined in, raising his hands and shrugging his shoulders in that way only obnoxious teenagers can. Even though he was in his thirties. ‘I was tryin’ to help him, sergeant.’

‘Okay, fine. Let’s say you helped him. Let’s say you *helped* him whilst wearing a balaclava. And after helping him, you ran out of the shop and were seen –’

‘Allegedly seen, please,’ the fat solicitor interjected.

Sharp grunted in response. ‘Allegedly seen handing something into a car which drove off.’

‘No. Freakin’. Comment,’ Barry replied, pointing his chin with each word in a way that made him move like a broken puppet.

‘What was it you gave to the driver, Barry?’ Sharp put a hand up to silence the solicitor. ‘It must have been important. Or valuable. You didn’t get much cash from the shop – allegedly – so I’m thinking it was something else. Barry?’

A silence hung in the air like a foul stench. Barry enjoyed the moment, milking it for all he could as he looked at Schaeffer with his gap-toothed grin. Without warning, he produced a mucus-filled snort of a laugh before placing a bony, nicotine-stained finger to his dried, peeling lips.

Sharp turned to look at Stone, who continued to stand in the corner looking like he wanted to be anywhere else. ‘DI Stone?’

‘Do you smoke, Barry?’ Stone asked, somewhat politely.

‘Y’what?’ Barry managed to screw his face into something rather resembling a pug-dog.

‘Do. You. Smoke?’ Stone repeated. ‘Cigarettes?’

‘Detective, I hardly see how my client’s personal...’

Stone cut him off. ‘Barry?’

‘Yeh. So? Not a crime, is it?’ Barry looked at the other two men at the table for clues to what Stone was getting at.

‘And how is your eyesight? Still good, yes?’ Stone maintained his calm, almost friendly tone, but he was by no means playing ‘good cop’.

‘Twenny-twenny, mate. That’s how I can see you bacon smokin’ so well.’

Sharp gave Stone one of those *‘Where the hell are you going with this?’* looks. A lot of people did that to Stone for most of the time in interview rooms.

Stone switched on his puzzled look. ‘Well, that’s a bit confusing, Barry. I mean, if your eyesight is that good, why did you need to get so close to the cigarette display if not to read the prices?’

‘My client has already told you that he...’

Stone cut Schaeffer off again. ‘It’s just that there were two footprints – that’s one left, and one right, next to each other, in front of the cigarettes.’

‘Not mine,’ Barry blurted as he sat back, defiantly folding his arms.

‘Okay. We’ll get our lab to look into that later, comparing your trainers – which had blood on them – to the footprints we lifted.’ Stone paused. ‘But let’s not worry about that for now, right?’ Stone walked to the other end of the room, standing in the back corner behind Barry. He ran his finger from his chin down the front of his neck, unconsciously pausing on the scar in the middle of his throat, just above his collar-bones. ‘The thing is, Barry, I have a little bit of a problem, to be entirely honest.’

‘You shittin’ me?’ Barry sniggered.

‘It’s called circumstantial evidence, you see.’ Sharp tried to glare at Stone, but faltered as he remembered rank. ‘You see,’ Stone continued, ‘there’s no point me trying to prove you were at the scene of the crime, because you readily admitted that. Since you already told us that you tried to help Mr Patel – highly commendable, I might add – there’s little point in me making much of the fact that you had his blood on your clothes.’

Barry turned to Schaeffer. ‘This guy’s doing a better job than you, mate.’

‘Sir, a word outside?’ Sharp stood up, but was immediately forced down again by a steely glare from the inspector, as if Stone had been standing by him with his hands on his shoulders. Sharp’s forehead had begun to dampen with a mild, cloying sweat of anger, which was denied an outlet by rank and experience.

Don’t you fucking dare, you little prick.

The air thickened with warning of dissent. Stone’s eyes remained fixed on Sharp’s. There was no alpha-male battle going on. Just some well-aimed pond-pissing.

‘So, Barry, I need your help,’ Stone continued. ‘You and I both know that without a weapon, or other physical evidence, we’re going nowhere with this.’

‘Don’t I know it,’ said Barry, hardly able to hide his smugness as he slapped Schaeffer on the arm and nodded at him as if to share a wink and a joke.

‘So, what I am going to do is get some of my science-y, CSI blokes to come in here and do a couple of tests. And I think one of them could end up killing our case against you completely. You know, if we don’t find what we are looking for.’

Schaeffer shuffled in his seat and motioned to object. Sharp just watched. Listened.

‘So, what do you say?’ Stone asked, moving to lean on the table right in front of the bony man. ‘Willing to give it a shot?’

‘What tests?’ Barry tried to hide his nerves under an unsteady laugh.

‘Tests for blood, Barry.’

The three other men all looked equally perplexed.

Stone continued. ‘You see, I am betting that we can find blood under your fingernails.’

‘I already told you...’

‘Yes, I know, Barry – you went to poor Mr Patel’s aid. And that’s also why we’ll find blood on your face, isn’t it? As he coughed up blood on the one man trying to help him.’

Barry smiled, sat back again and folded his arms. ‘Now I know you’re lying.’

‘Not at all, Barry, not at all. Even when we do find tiny little blood spots all over your face, our dear Mr Schaeffer here will no doubt point out that it’s merely circumstantial evidence because you said you were being a model citizen trying to save the life of an injured man. All I need you to do is consent to us having a look.’

‘This is highly irregular, Detective,’ piped up the frustrated solicitor. ‘And I must advise my client against any such consent.’

‘Nah, I’ll do it,’ Barry confidently insisted. ‘Let them do their stupid test. Then they’ll see how wrong they are.’

Schaeffer shot a glance at Stone. It was one of recognition. He knew what the detective was doing.

‘Barry, I think we should talk about this alone,’ the solicitor pleaded.

‘Nah, it’s fine, let them do their stupid test.’

‘Do go and call the gentlemen in, Sergeant,’ Stone asked Sharp in his best patronising manner.

Stone took a seat as he watched the solicitor desperately try to silence his client, whilst Sharp stood up, not quite sure what he was supposed to do.

‘He’s lying! I know he ain’t got no CSI out there,’ said Barry, cocky in his certainty. ‘You’re lying, you stinkin’ pig. I know you ain’t sending no CSI in here to search my face!’

‘Sergeant.’ Stone repeated the command whilst fixing his gaze on the bony man. This was a poker game and both held their final hand. All in.

Go on, you little shit. Bite.

‘Yeh, Sergeant,’ Barry mocked, ‘you call your CSI, ’cause you ain’t finding no blood on my face. No way!’

‘Oh, I think we will. I am sure of it,’ Stone said.

Barry launched to his feet. ‘No way. You’re fucking bluffing me. You ain’t got no CSI out there and you won’t find no blood on my face.’

‘Then do the test, Barry. Prove me wrong.’

‘Not if I was wearing a balaclava, you fucking won’t.’

There was a stunned pause. Schaeffer put his head in his hands. The penny finally dropped for Sharp, who fought to hold back a smile.

‘Tell me,’ Stone said, leaning back in his chair, ‘why were you wearing a balaclava in the shop, Barry? If you were just there to help him.’

Barry Wigfield looked at all the men, almost pleadingly as it began to dawn on him what he’d just said.

‘No, no,’ he said, ‘what I mean...what I’m saying is...’

‘So, we know you were there, Barry. And we know you weren’t a customer.’ Stone leant in very close. ‘Why *were* you in that shop, Barry? Tell me.’

There was nowhere to turn, even though the bony man tried.

Stone pressed further.

‘What did you give to the man in the car, Barry? We know you took something from the shop...’

‘No!’

‘Come on, Barry. This is all above you. Attempted murder in a little shop for a tiny bit of cash? You don’t fool me, Barry. *What* was it for? Really?’

DS Sharp tried to play a hand. ‘Drugs?’ he proffered.

Schaeffer cut in, sweating and glowing red, fumbling with his pen to scrawl notes. ‘Stop this immediately, gentlemen.’

‘Is that why you did it, Barry? Drugs?’ Stone barked.

‘No!’ he stammered.

‘Then what? *Why?*’ Stone pressed.

‘It was just one bottle. And I don’t know who. And fuck knows why.’

‘A bottle? Of what?’

‘That fizzy wine. The posh stuff. Moh-et.’

There was a moment of silence as everyone in the room besides Barry Wigfield pondered the irony of a low-life criminal robbing a shop in Nechells – one of Birmingham’s well-known crime hotspots – and only taking a single bottle of expensive Champagne.

‘All yours, Sergeant Sharp,’ said Stone, as he left the room, deep in thought.

A single bottle of Moët. What the f...?