

I

Tufty lunged, arm outstretched, fingertips just brushing the backpack ... then closing on thin air. Too slow.

The wee scroat laughed, shoved his way through a couple of pensioners examining the pay-as-you-go phones, and exploded out through the doors. His mate hurdled the fallen oldies, hooting and cheering. Hit the pavement and ran right, twisting as he went to stick both middle fingers up through the Vodafone shop window.

Tufty sprinted after them. Burst through the doors and out onto Union Street.

Four-storey buildings in light granite lined the four-lane road, their bottom floors a solid ribbon of shops. Buses grumbled by, white vans, taxis, cars.

The foot traffic wasn't nearly thick enough for the pair of them to disappear into a crowd. They didn't even try. Running, laughing, hoodies flapping out behind them. A couple of mobile phones clattered to the paving slabs, screens shattering amongst the chewing-gum acne.

Look at them: neither one a day over thirteen, acting like this was the most fun they'd ever had in their lives. Expensive trainers, ripped jeans, one bright-blue hoodie – violent orange hair – one bright-red – dark with frosted tips – both

with stupid trendy haircuts. Earrings and piercings sparkling in the morning sunlight.

Tufty picked up the pace. 'Hoy! You!'

The clacker-clack of Cuban heels hammered the pavement behind him.

He glanced back and there she was: Detective Sergeant Steel, *actually* giving chase for once. Didn't think she had it in her. Her dark-grey suit was open, yellow silk shirt shimmering, grey hair sticking out in all directions like a demented ferret. Face set in a grimace. Probably hadn't done any serious running since she was a kid – trying not to get eaten by dinosaurs.

A man wiped coffee off his jacket. 'You rotten wee shites! I was drinking that!'

An old woman grabbed at her split bag-for-life, its contents rolling free. Off the kerb and into the road. 'Come back here and pick this up, or I'll tan your backsides!'

Up ahead, the one in the blue hoodie barrelled through a knot of people stopped in the middle of the pavement chatting, sending one bouncing off a solicitor's shop window with a resounding '*boinnnnngggggg*', the others clattering down with their shopping. Another couple of mobile phones, still in their boxes, joined them, spilling out of the open backpack.

Hoodie Red sprinted past the e-cigarette shop where the granite buildings came to an abrupt end. A pause in the street, marked by a short row of black iron railings, a small gap, then a sort of fake two-storey-high neo-classical frontage thing, with a graveyard lurking behind its Corinthian pillars.

A grin and Red jinked right, into the gap and down the stairs.

Tufty gritted his teeth. Come on: *faster*.

He scrabbled to a halt in front of the railings.

Red was still there, dancing from foot to foot on the stairs, unable to get any further than a quarter of the way down due to the bunch of mothers wrestling pushchairs up.

The stairs descended about fifteen/sixteen feet to a narrow cobbled road that disappeared under Union Street.

Ha! Got you.

Red pulled a face, gave Tufty the finger again, then jumped. Clearing the handrail. Dropping six foot onto the top of a Transit van, parked below. A *boom* of battered metal. Then he rolled off, landed square on his feet and took off into the tunnel. Still laughing.

The driver leaned out of his window, shaking his fist. 'Hoy!'

Blue clearly didn't fancy his chances. Instead he went left, sprinting across the bus lane, hooting away as car horns blared – a taxi and a truck slammed on their brakes, inches away from turning him into five stone of hoodie-wearing pâté.

Blue or Red? Blue or Red?

Steel's voice cut through the horns. 'Shift it! Police! Coming through!'

A quick look – she shoved her way through a couple of gawkers and some well-meaning souls helping pick up the old lady's shopping.

Blue or Red?

The stairs were still jammed with mothers and pushchairs. Red.

Deep breath. 'Oh God...'

Tufty stuck one hand on the rail and swung his legs up and over into thin air.

It whistled past him, then, *boom* onto the Transit's roof, just as it pulled away. He had time for a tiny scream as the world flipped end-over-end, then the cobbles broke his fall with a lung-emptying *thud*.

Argh...

They were cold against his back. Little flashing yellow lights pinged around the edges of the bright-blue sky, keeping time with the throbbing high-pitched whine in his ears.

Steel's face appeared over the railings, scowling down at him. 'Don't just lie there, get after the wee sod!' A shake of the fist, and she disappeared again.

Urgh...

Tufty struggled up to his feet. Shook his head – sending the little yellow lights swirling – and lurched into the tunnel.

Roberta shook her head. Silly sod. Having a wee kip in the middle of the road while the thieving gits got away. Never trust a stick-thin, short-arsed detective constable. Especially the kind with ginger hair – cut so short their whole head looked like a mouldy kiwi fruit – and watery pale-blue eyes the same colour as piddled-on Blu-Tack.

That's what she got for taking the new boy out on a shout.

Well Tufty had better sodding well catch Hoodie Number Two, because if Tufty didn't Tufty was in for a shoe-leather suppository.

And in the meantime...

She charged across the pavement and out into mid-morning traffic, one hand up on either side of her eyes to shut out the view. 'Please don't kill me, please don't kill me, please don't kill me...' Horns blared. Something HUGE slammed on its brakes – they squealed like pigs, hissed like dragons.

An angry voice: '*YOU BLOODY IDIOT!*'

And pavement! Beautiful, beautiful pavement.

She dropped her hands.

Wasn't difficult to see which way Hoodie Number One had gone – just follow the trail of swearing people sprawled across the beautiful pavement, leading west along Union Street.

Roberta dragged out her phone, dialling with one hand as she ran past McDonald's. Jumped over a young woman with a screaming toddler in her arms, sprawled beside the bus shelter.

A bored woman sighed from the mobile's earpiece, followed by: *'Control Room.'*

'I need backup to Union Street, now!'

'Nearest car is two minutes away. How severe is the situation? Do you need a firearms team?'

Roberta threaded her way through a clot of idiots outside Clarks, all staring after Hoodie Number One. 'Shoplifter: early teens, blue hoodie, orange hair, ripped jeans—'

'Oh you have got to be kidding me. We're not scrambling a patrol car for a shoplifter!'

The tunnel under Union Street spat Tufty out between two tall granite buildings. Cold blue-grey in the shadows, the windows at ground level either bricked up or barred. He limp-ran to the end, making little hissing noises every other step. Like his left sock was sinking its teeth into his ankle.

Oh let's go after the *red*-hoodied shoplifter. Let's jump off a bridge...

That's what you got for being brave: a whack on the cobblestones and a carnivorous sock.

He burst out from between the buildings and into the Green. Aberdeen Market was a massive Seventies concrete hatbox off to the left, making the stubby end of a blunt triangle – old granite buildings on the other two sides and...

There he was: Red. Jumping up and down behind a line of big council recycling bins. Still laughing. Twirling around on the spot, middle fingers out again. Waiting for him. Taunting him.

Then off, running down the middle of the Green. Getting away.

Not this time.

Tufty put some welly into it. Onward brave Sir Quirrel!

He jumped, hip-sliding across one of the bins marked 'CARDBOARD ONLY', *Starsky-and-Hutch* style. Landed on his bad ankle. Hissed.

Started running again.

Red looked back, grinned at him, barrelling headlong towards a fenced-off eating area outside a wee bar/restaurant full of loved-up couples eating a late breakfast in the sun. Red jumped the barrier, feet clattering on top of the tables, sending plates and glasses flying.

Diners lunged for him.

A man jerked back as his Bloody Mary introduced itself to his lap. 'Hey! What the hell...?'

A woman bared her teeth. 'Get your manky feet out of my eggs Benedict!'

Then bang – Red was out the other side.

Tufty pumped his arms and legs harder. Leaned into the sprint as he skirted the dining area. Ignoring the sock eating his ankle. Closing the gap...

Horrible Hoodie Number One did a wee dancy twirl around an old man with a walking stick, showing off, hooting. Then disappeared around the side of Thorntons.

Sodding hell...

Roberta gripped her phone tighter. 'He's gone down the steps to the Green.'

Another sigh from the bored woman on the other end. *'I don't care if he's gone down on Nelson Mandela's ghost, you're not getting a patrol car.'*

The wee sod's face popped back around the corner again, joined by a double-handed two-fingered salute. He jiggled the V-signs in her direction, then vanished.

'But—'

'You're not a child, for goodness' sake. Surely you can catch a shoplifter without a SWAT team!'

Roberta wheeled around the corner, grabbing onto a big bearded guy to stay upright. 'Well bugger you, then!'

The big guy flinched back. 'What did I do?'

She jammed her phone in her pocket and skidded to a halt at the top of the stairs.

Oh ... wow, that was a *long* way down.

The stairs weren't far off vertical, at least three-and-a-half-storeys'-worth of thin granite steps, with a handrail at either side and one down the middle. Fall here and it'd be bounce, crack, bang, wallop, thump, crunch, scream, crash, splinter, *THUD*. Followed by sirens and nine months in traction.

Hoodie Number One was already halfway down the stairs. Taking them two at a time.

A boxed iPhone spilled from his backpack and bounced off the granite steps.

Gah...

She stuck both hands out, hovering them over the railings. And ran.

Going to die, going to die, going to die...

Down at the bottom of the stairs, Hoodie Number Two – the one dressed in red – hammered past, laughter echoing off the grey buildings.

And Hoodie Number One was nearly at the bottom too, grinning over his shoulder at her.

Where the hell was Tufty when you actually needed him?

How could one detective constable be so completely and utterly, *totally*—

He ran into view, staring straight ahead. Which was a shame, because Hoodie Number One wasn't watching where he was going either and smashed right into him.

BANG!

They both hit the cobblestones in a twisted starfish of arms and legs. Thrashing and bashing and crashing as she hurried down the last two flights of stairs and into the Green.

They rolled into the 'Pedestrian Zone ENDS' sign with a faint clang.

'Aaaargh, gerroffus gerroffus!'

Roberta skidded to a halt at the foot of the stairs. Looked right.

Hoodie Number Two was just visible as a red smudge – running deeper into the tunnel that led under the St Nicholas Centre and out to the dual carriageway. He turned and treated them to his middle fingers. Then his voice thrummed out, amplified by all that concrete and granite, 'CATCH YOU LATER, MASTURBATOR!' That red smudge vanished into the gloom.

'Sodding hell...'. Roberta bent double, grabbing her knees and puffing like an ancient Labrador.

Tufty hauled Hoodie Number One to his feet, both hands cuffed behind the wee sod's back.

A cough, then Tufty wiped a hand over his shiny forehead. Gave his prisoner a shoogle. 'You are *comprehensively* nicked.'

The wee sod just grinned and stood on his tiptoes, shouting after his friend: 'IN A WHILE, PAEDOPHILE!'

Kids today.

Tufty pushed through the scabby grey doors into a scabby grey room. Voices echoed up from the cells below, bouncing off the breeze-block walls – some singing, some shouting, some swearing, some crying. Call it 'NE Division's Custody Suite Symphony' in arrested major.

He tightened his grip on the blue-hoodied shoplifter, manhandling him over to the custody desk – chest high

with a selection of that season's Police Scotland posters and notices Sellotaped to the beech laminate front. 'BOGUS CALLERS, SCAMMER, AND THIEVES', 'HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?', 'DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ISN'T LOVE', "NO" MEANS "NO!"

A huge man was hunched over the desk, wearing the standard-issue black T-shirt with sergeant's stripes on the epaulettes. No need to call in Hercule Poirot to investigate 'who ate all the pies' – the answer was elementary, my dear Morse: Big Gary. He had his tongue poking out the side of his mouth as he scribbled away at something.

Steel sauntered up, popped onto her tiptoes and peered over the desk. 'Aye, aye...' Her hand snaked out and she snatched whatever the sergeant was scribbling on. 'Colouring-in for adults?' She flipped through the pages. 'This no' a bit advanced for you, Gary? You're supposed to stay *inside* the lines.'

Big Gary grabbed for it, but she skipped back out of reach. Grinning.

'Tufty, do the honours. I'm going to draw willies on all Big Gary's pictures.'

Another grab, another miss. 'Don't you dare!'

Tufty gave Blue a nudge, propelling him closer to the desk. Then mimed pinging a hotel bell. '*Ding*. Single room with en suite and a view of the lake, please.'

A tiny smile flirted with the corner of Big Gary's mouth. 'And what name's the reservation in?'

Silence.

Tufty poked Blue again. 'The nice man wants to know your name.'

Blue's shoulders came up. His voice: small and sulky. 'No comment.'

A sigh. Then Big Gary took a form from beneath the desk and slapped it down on the top. 'Very good, son. But you're

supposed to save that bit for when your lawyer gets here.
Now: name?’

A grin. ‘Wanky McSpunkbucket. The third.’

‘Oh be still my splitting sides.’ Big Gary pointed at another of his many, many posters.

‘IT IS AN OFFENCE TO GIVE FALSE DETAILS TO THE POLICE.’

‘Let’s not make it any worse, eh?’

Blue shrugged again. Looked down at his shiny white trainers. ‘Charles Roberts.’

‘Thank you. And where do you live, Charles Roberts?’

‘No com...’

Big Gary pointed at the poster again.

‘Thirteen Froghall Crescent.’

‘There we go.’

Tufty snapped on a pair of nitrile gloves and dug into the knapsack, still strapped to the kid’s back.

‘Hey, gerroff us!’

He stuck a pair of iPhones – brand new and still in their boxes – on the custody desk. Followed by half-a-dozen Samsungs: boxed, three Nokias: boxed, eight assorted smartphones: used, and four wallets. Another wallet and two smartphones: used, from the pockets of the blue hoodie.

‘I never seen them before in my life. You planted that lot.’

‘Really?’ He took hold of one of the hoodie sleeves and pulled it up. A row of three watches sparkled in the romantic overhead strip lighting.

‘You planted that as well.’

‘Don’t be a—’

The double doors banged open and in marched a heavy-weight boxer in a dark suit and pale blue tie. Broken nose, narrow eyes, hair swept back from a widow’s peak. Two plainclothes uglies followed in his wake, both in matching grey suits and red ties, hipster haircuts, and I’m-So-Hard-

And-Cool expressions. Like a two-man boy band. The uglies frogmarched a little guy with a grubby face up to the custody desk. The cuffs of his shirt were ragged and stained a dark reddy-brown, more stains on the front of his tattered jumper.

The boxer pointed at Big Gary. 'Sergeant McCormack, I want Mr Forester processed, seen by the duty doctor, given a solicitor, and placed in an interrogation room within the hour.'

Steel bristled. 'Hoy, wait your turn. We were here first.'

He turned a withering glare on her. 'Did you say something, Sergeant?'

'Aye. Back of the queue, mush.'

The boxer stepped closer, looming over her. 'You seem to be a little confused, *Sergeant*. You're not a detective chief inspector any more.' He poked her with a finger. 'And while you're running around after shoplifters and druggies, I'm out there catching murderers.'

One of his sidekicks sniggered.

Steel's face curdled.

But he just smiled. 'I outrank the hell out of you now, and if I say my suspect goes first, he goes first. Understand?'

She glowered back, lips and jaws moving like she was chewing on something horrible.

'I said: do – you – understand?'

The reply was barely audible. 'Yes, Guv.'

'Or would you like another visit to Professional Standards?'

She narrowed her eyes. Bared her teeth.

Oh God, it was all going to kick off, wasn't it?

But Steel swallowed it down. Cricked her neck to one side. 'No, Guv.'

'Good. I'm glad we had this little chat, aren't you?'

Please don't hit him, *please* don't hit him...

* * *

Tufty stuck a finger in his other ear and leaned back against the meeting room wall. Next to the whiteboard with a huge willy drawn on it in black and red marker pen. 'Yes. ... No. ... I think that's OK, isn't it? ... Were we? Sorry, didn't know.'

Idiot.

Roberta let her head fall back, over the back of her leather chair, and stared up at the ceiling with its regular grid of toothpaste-white tiles. OK, the view was a bit dull, but it was still better than looking at Harmsworth.

She snuck a peek anyway.

He was sitting on the other side of the long oval meeting table, feet up on one of the big blotter-sized notepads, peering at a copy of the *Aberdeen Examiner* like someone who'd forgotten his glasses. Chubby wee sod that he was, with his receding hairline and a face that looked as if it'd never smiled in its life. A miserable balding bloodhound in a rumpled brown suit. Picking his nose when he thought no one was looking.

Oh she got all the 'special' ones on her team, didn't she?

Roberta's phone *ding-dinged* at her. Incoming text:

I beat Lizzy Horsens by eight strokes! She's
moaning about it like a whiny little bitch!
It'll kill her when I win the trophy again!
I'm a golfing NINJA!!! :)

She smiled and thumbed out a reply:

Golfing ninja Susan!

So I take it we're celebrating tonight? You
wear a sexy nightie and I'll pretend I'm
there to fix the washing machine.

Send.

Harmsworth was digging away in his nose again. Well if he was searching for a brain he was excavating the wrong end of his body.

Ding-ding:

Don't be naughty. Logan's coming over to see the kids tonight, remember? I'm doing chicken casserole, so don't be late.

Sit down and break bread with Logan Traitorous Scumbag McRae? Rather break the casserole dish over his sodding head.

Then make him eat all the jagged broken bits...

Oh for goodness' sake: Harmsworth was *still* at it.

He glanced up and caught her looking. Popped his finger out. Sighed. Then droned on in that depressing Marvin-the-Paranoid-Android voice of his, 'Listen to this:' he ruffled his newspaper, "Blackburn residents live in fear of sex pest pervert. 'I can't even cook dinner with the blinds open,' said Janice Wilkinson, brackets, thirty-one. 'What if one of the children look out of the window and see him?'" Another sigh. 'You'd have to be a bit funny in the head, wouldn't you?'

Roberta grimaced back at him. 'I used to be the one catching murderers. And *now* look at me. Stuck here with you pair of neeps.'

Tufty laughed. 'I know. ... Yeah. Probably.'

'I mean, who wakes up one morning and thinks, "You know what I fancy? Sticking on a superhero mask and having a wank outside someone's kitchen window while they're doing the dishes."'

The boy idiot put a hand over the mouthpiece of his phone. 'Sarge? That's our boy ready to interview.'

'Oh joy.' She let her head fall back again, then blew a big wet raspberry. 'Urgh...' A drizzle of cold spittle drifted back down across her face. She sat up and wiped it off.

Tufty went back to his phone. 'Yeah, we'll be right down.'

Harmsworth gave his paper another theatrical ruffle. 'Speaking of wankers, did you see this?' He turned it around,

showing off a two-page spread. A photo of a skinny wee nyaff sat beneath the headline “POLICE CORRUPTION BLIGHTS ABERDEEN” CLAIMS MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE VICTIM’. Jack Sodding Wallace, wearing his going-to-court suit, standing outside the council offices on Broad Street. He was holding a sheet of paper up, as if that meant anything, looking all serious and concerned at it. Raping wee shite.

Harmsworth sniffed. ‘Jack Wallace says we’re all a bunch of useless dodgy bastards.’

‘Jack Wallace can roll himself up sideways and shove it up a llama’s bumhole!’

‘Says all we do is fit up innocent people and take bribes.’

She stabbed a finger in Harmsworth’s direction. ‘I’m no’ telling you again, Constable.’

A huff and he went back to his newspaper. ‘Don’t know why I bother. No one *ever* appreciates it.’

Tufty put his phone away and pointed at the door. ‘Sarge?’

Harmsworth was still groaning on. ‘I should just go jump under a bus. Give you all a laugh. Oh look at Owen, he’s all squished and dead. Isn’t that funny? Ha, ha, ha.’

‘Well, we can all dream.’ Roberta stood. Twinged a bit, then had a dig at her treasonous left underwire. Whoever designed bras to have sharp pokey bits of metal in them needed a stiff kick up the bumhole. ‘Meantime: get your backside in gear. Two teas, interview room...?’ She looked at Tufty.

‘Three.’

‘And see if you can scare up some biscuits too.’

A groan, then Harmsworth made a *big* show of folding his paper and stood. Smeared a martyred expression across his miserable face. ‘Oh, just order Owen about, why not? Not as if he contributes anything to the team, is it? No. Make the tea, Owen. Find some biscuits, Owen...’ He

slouched from the room, leaving the door to swing closed behind him.

Idiots. Morons. Whingers. And tosspots. Why couldn't she get dynamic go-getting sex bunnies in her team? How was that fair?

She glowered at the ceiling. 'I swear on the sainted grave of Jasmine's gerbil, Agamemnon...'

The door opened again.

For God's sake!

Roberta turned the glower into a glare. 'Two sodding teas and a couple of biscuits! How difficult can it—' But it wasn't DC Moanier-Than-Thou Harmsworth, it was a lump of uniformed officers all clutching notebooks and clipboards.

The guy at the front had inspector's pips on his broad shoulders. He looked over the top of his little round glasses at his watch. Oh, I'm so *important*! 'What are you doing in here?'

'Inspector Evans. It's been yonks, hasn't it? How's your piles these days?'

He stiffened. 'I've got this meeting room booked till five.'

'Just keeping it warm for you.' She stood and hooked a thumb at Tufty, then at the door. 'We're leaving anyway.'

Tufty followed her out into the corridor, and as the door swung shut Inspector Evans's voice went up an octave. '*Oh for goodness' sake! Who keeps drawing willies on all the whiteboards?*'