



*Race to the Kill*

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## PROLOGUE

Sarah

The smell of newly laid tarmac gets stronger as she gets closer, until it eliminates all the other scents of late afternoon on a hot June day. She carries a bottle of water, straight from the fridge. Beads of water coat the plastic and run over her fingers. The lazy turn of the concrete mixer, grit hurling against its sides, slows and stops. He's seen her coming. He wipes his hands on the back of his trousers and his eyes dance with a smile. She hesitates, unsure whether she should cross the trench, lined with orange and yellow cables. She holds out the bottle, but he won't be able to reach it from the other side. She is watching a bead of sweat run down his neck from behind his ear. It trickles along his clavicle and down the centre of his chest where it soaks into a stain on his vest.

He steps over the trench, his legs longer than hers, and lands right in front of her, teetering on her side, right on the edge. She can smell him now, see the thin red blood vessels lining the whites of his eyes. He's too close. She holds the

bottle of water against her chest, as if it will protect her. His mouth is open, showing his broken teeth. The muscles along his arms are taut as he reaches his sinewy hands out, like a hawk's talons.

Half a second before he touches her shoulders, she screams, and the sound bounces off the breeze-block wall beyond the trench. It echoes off the solid mass of the building behind her. His face changes and his grip tightens, as if he's going to shake her. A door opens, and she hears feet at the top of the metal fire escape. She is still screaming, trying to push him off, but she is not strong enough. This time, though, someone is coming to rescue her.

# CHAPTER ONE

Friday night

The petrol gauge had been nudging red for nearly an hour when PC Sean Denton finally persuaded his partner, PC Gavin Wentworth, to pull into the petrol station close to the Chasebridge estate. Gav stayed behind the wheel, while Sean got out to fill the car. Beyond the spot-lit petrol pumps the woods loomed in the dark. It was just after midnight. Fuel glugged into the empty tank and an owl hooted somewhere over the rough fields. The heat of the day had evaporated and Sean wished he'd put his jacket on.

He returned the nozzle to the pump and went to pay at the window. He asked the young lad on duty to get him a couple of bags of crisps and a can of pop. Pocketing the receipt for the petrol, he handed over a five pound note for the snacks. The cashier's eyes darted up from the money, over Sean's shoulder. A flicker of white in the reinforced glass was enough to make Sean spin round, one hand on his baton. But it was just a woman, dishevelled and pinch-faced, with greasy bobbed hair. Probably no

more than thirty, but looking fifty. She took a step back, startled. She'd have to be desperate to try and rob a police officer in full view of the cashier and a police vehicle, so what was her game? She covered her open mouth with the sleeve of her dirty-brown jumper and began to cry.

'All right,' Sean said. 'Do you want to tell me what's happened?'

She gulped a breath.

'You've got to come,' she said.

She reached out and grabbed his wrist. He could have broken her hold, but he didn't want to drop the crisps and the can of pop. Besides, there was no strength in her fingers.

'Everything all right?' Gav was out of the car and walking towards them.

He felt her grip loosen as Gav approached and pulled his arm away, but she wasn't going to let him go that easily. Her fingers darted out and grabbed the sleeve of his shirt.

'You've got to come with me!'

Her voice cracked, the volume out of proportion with how close they were standing.

'Now then, why don't you let go of my colleague, love, and we'll see how we can help you?' Gav said.

She took no notice and tried to drag Sean towards the road.

'You have to come!'

Gav didn't try to talk her round a second time. He might have been pushing for retirement, but he still had the moves. Before she knew what had happened, the woman had lost her grip on Sean and found herself up against the window of the garage shop, Gav's hands firmly on her shoulders.

'Now, if you have something to tell us,' he said, 'I suggest you spit it out, and then we can all go about our business.'

But if you lay one more filthy little finger on my colleague, I will arrest you for assaulting a police officer.'

She looked at Sean for support.

'What's your name?' Sean said.

'Mary.'

'Mary what?'

'Just Mary.'

'Okay, Mary, why don't you come and sit in the back of the car and tell us what the problem is?'

She shook her head violently and a gobbet of snot dislodged from her runny nose. Gav stepped back to avoid catching it in the face, and Mary seized the opportunity to pull away from him. She ran to the edge of the garage forecourt, but hovered there, unwilling to leave.

'Well?' Gav said. 'Are you going after her or shall I?'

Sean sighed. 'Can we get her in the car?'

'Do we have to? She stinks.'

'What do you suggest?' Sean said.

'She wants you, Sean. She wants you bad.'

'Knock it off.'

'Well, maybe you should go with her,' Gav said, 'and see what's up?'

'Do I have to?'

'I'll follow in the car. Go on.'

Sean looked at Mary, standing there, dark eyes watching him under her greasy fringe.

'Okay,' he said. 'Let me find out where we're going first.'

He walked over to her, while Gav hung back by the kiosk window.

He heard the cashier say: 'Does your mate want his change?' and looked back to see Gav pocketing the money.

Nice one. He'd have to remember to get it off him later.

'Where are we going, Mary?'

'The old school.'

She turned away, setting off across the dual carriageway with a limping gait that didn't appear to slow her down.

'Gav!' Sean called. 'Chasebridge School, the old site, not the Academy.'

'I'll be right behind you.'

Sean knew that wouldn't be entirely true. Gavin would have to drive to the next roundabout and double back, then he'd be restricted to the vehicle access to the estate, while he and Mary would be taking the shorter, pedestrian route, between the flats, on cracked paved paths studded with bollards.

'I'll be on the radio,' Sean said.

'Don't worry, she won't hurt you.'

Gav waved him off and went back to the car.

Sean had to run to catch up with Mary. He tried to get her to talk, but she walked on, head down against the light rain that had begun to fall. They came to the four tower blocks at the top of the estate. Out of habit Sean glanced up to the second floor of Eagle Mount One, where his father lived. The windows of Jack Denton's flat were all but dark. Just a light in the kitchen. Maybe Chloe, his half-sister, was still awake. Sean felt a pang of guilt. He hadn't been to see his dad for nearly two weeks. The old man had been in and out of hospital since Easter and although there was no love lost between them, Sean still felt he should do the right thing and go round occasionally.

'Shit!' He'd trodden in a deep puddle, caused by a faulty pipe on the corner of Eagle Mount Two. The muddy water

seeped over the top his boot and into his sock. After the run of hot days they'd had, he could only imagine where this water had come from. It definitely wasn't rainwater.

Mary turned to check he was still following.

'It's all right. I'm still here,' he said. 'I don't suppose you want to tell me what's happening, do you? I could have some backup ready, if I had a clue what we're actually doing.'

'I ran out when it started,' she said. 'I didn't see.'

'What started?'

She looked away and carried on walking.

'Something started in the old school?' He said. 'Is that where you've been living?'

Her pace slowed and he came alongside her. The warmth of her body gave off the gagging scent of unwashed skin, tobacco and alcohol: the cocktail odour of the rough sleeper.

'Mary, you need to tell me. Is someone in danger?'

'If you're quick you can run.'

'And if you're not?'

She winced at the question. 'You have to pay.'

He reached for his radio.

'Victor Charlie Four Three.'

'Go ahead, Four Three.'

'I'm heading for the site of the old Chasebridge School, Disraeli Road. We've been stopped by a member of the public. Possible incident, risk to persons sleeping rough in the school premises. Proceeding on foot, with the informant. Victor Charlie Three One is en route, via the main entrance. We may need backup.'

'Yes, received, Victor Charlie Four Three,' the call-handler's voice crackled out of the radio.

He saw the face that went with it. Lisa-Marie, dark hair, big brown eyes. They'd had a quick cuddle at an office party when he was still a PCSO. It came back to him, with a blush, every time he heard her voice.

'I'll update when I'm closer,' he said, forcing his mind back on the job.

'Other patrols are committed, Victor Charlie Four Three. There's a big fight in town. I'll get back to you as soon as I can.'

*Great, Sean thought. We're on our own.*