

Friday 6 February 2009



1

There was a smattering of applause as Malcolm Fox entered the room.

‘Don’t strain yourselves,’ he said, placing his scuffed briefcase on the desk nearest the door. There were two other Complaints in the office. They were already getting back to work as Fox slipped out of his overcoat. Three inches of snow had fallen overnight in Edinburgh. A similar amount had stopped London dead a week ago, but Fox had managed to get into work and so, by the look of it, had everyone else. The world outside felt temporarily cleansed. There had been tracks in Fox’s garden – he knew there was a family of foxes somewhere near his estate; the houses backed on to a municipal golf course. His nickname at Police HQ was ‘Foxy’, but he didn’t think of himself that way. ‘A bear of a man’ – that was the way one of his previous bosses had described him. Slow but steady, and only occasionally to be feared.

Tony Kaye, a bulging folder tucked beneath one arm, walked past the desk and managed to squeeze Fox’s shoulder without dropping anything.

‘Nice one all the same,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Tony,’ Fox said.

Lothian and Borders Police HQ was on Fettes Avenue. From some windows there was a view towards Fettes College. A few of the officers in the Complaints had been to private schools, but none to Fettes. Fox himself had been educated largely free of charge – Boroughmuir, then Heriot Watt. Supported Hearts FC though seldom managed even a home fixture these days. Had no interest in rugby, even when his city played host to the Six Nations. February was Six Nations month, meaning there’d be hordes of

the Welsh in town this weekend, dressed up as dragons and toting oversized inflatable leeks. Fox reckoned he would watch the match on TV, might even rouse himself to go down the pub. Five years now he'd been off the drink, but for the past two he'd trusted himself with occasional visits. Only when he was in the right frame of mind though; only when the willpower was strong.

He hung up his coat and decided he could lose the suit jacket, too. Some of his colleagues at HQ reckoned the braces were an affectation, but he'd lost the best part of a stone and didn't like belts. The braces weren't the shouty kind – dark blue against a plain light-blue shirt. His tie today was a deep dark red. He draped his jacket over the back of his chair, smoothed it at the shoulders and sat down, sliding the locks of the briefcase open, easing out the paperwork on Glen Heaton. Heaton was the reason the Complaints had summoned up the brief round of applause. Heaton was a result. It had taken Fox and his team the best part of a year to compile their case. That case had now been accepted by the Procurator Fiscal's office, and Heaton, having been cautioned and interviewed, would go to trial.

Glen Heaton – fifteen years on the force, eleven of them in CID. And for most of those eleven, he'd been bending the rules to his own advantage. But he'd stepped too far over the line, leaking information not only to his pals in the media but to the criminals themselves. And that had brought him once more to the attention of the Complaints.

Complaints and Conduct, to give the office its full title. They were the cops who investigated other cops. They were the 'Soft Shoe Brigade', the 'Rubber Heels'. Within Complaints and Conduct was another smaller grouping – the Professional Standards Unit. While Complaints and Conduct worked the meat-and-potatoes stuff – grievances about patrol cars parked in disabled bays or cop neighbours who played their music too loud – the PSU was sometimes referred to as the Dark Side. They sniffed out racism and corruption. They looked at bungs received and blind eyes turned. They were quiet and serious and determined, and had as much power as they needed in order to do the job. Fox and his team were PSU. Their office was on a different floor from Complaints and Conduct, and a quarter of the size. Heaton had been under surveillance for months, his home phone tapped, mobile phone records scrutinised, computer checked and checked again – all without his knowledge. He'd been tailed and photographed until Fox had known more about the man than his own wife did, right

down to the lap-dancer he'd been dating and the son from a previous relationship.

A lot of cops asked the Complaints the same question: how can you do it? How can you spit on your own kind? These were officers you'd worked with, or might work with in future. These were, it was often said, 'the good guys'. But that was the problem right there – what did it mean to be 'good'? Fox had puzzled over that one himself, staring into the mirror behind the bar as he nursed another soft drink.

It's us and them, Foxy ... you need to cut corners sometimes or nothing ever gets done ... have you never done it yourself? Whiter than white, are you? The pure driven?

Not the pure driven, no. Sometimes he felt swept along – swept into PSU without really wanting it. Swept into relationships ... and then out again not too long after. He'd opened his bedroom curtains this morning and stared at the snow, wondering about phoning in, saying he was stuck. But then a neighbour's car had crawled past and the lie had melted away. He had come to work because that was what he did. He came to work and he investigated cops. Heaton was under suspension now, albeit on full pay. The paperwork had been passed along to the Procurator Fiscal.

'That's that, then?' Fox's other colleague was standing in front of the desk, hands bunched as usual in trouser pockets, easing back on his heels. Joe Naysmith, six months in, still keen. He was twenty-eight, which was young for the Complaints. Tony Kaye's notion was that Naysmith saw the job as a quick route towards management. The youngster flicked his head, trying to do something about the floppy fringe he was always being teased about.

'So far, so good,' Malcolm Fox said. He'd pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and was blowing his nose.

'Drinks on you tonight, then?'

Over at his own desk, Tony Kaye had been listening. He leaned back in his chair, establishing eye contact with Fox.

'Mind it's nothing stronger than a milkshake for the wean. He'll be after long trousers next.'

Naysmith turned and lifted a hand from its pocket just long enough to give Kaye the finger. Kaye puckered his lips and went back to his reading.

'You're not in the bloody playground,' a fresh voice growled from the doorway. Chief Inspector Bob McEwan was standing there. He sauntered in and grazed his knuckles against Naysmith's forehead.

‘Haircut, young Joseph – what’ve I told you?’

‘Sir,’ Naysmith mumbled, heading back to his desk. McEwan was studying his wristwatch.

‘Two bloody hours I was in that meeting.’

‘I’m sure a lot got done, Bob.’

McEwan looked at Fox. ‘Chief thinks there’s the whiff of something septic up in Aberdeen.’

‘Any details?’

‘Not yet. Can’t say I’ve any enthusiasm to see it in my in-tray.’

‘You’ve friends in Grampian?’

‘I’ve friends nowhere, Foxy, and that’s just the way I like it.’ The Chief Inspector paused, seeming to remember something. ‘Heaton?’ he enquired, watching Fox nod slowly. ‘Good, good.’

The way he said it, Fox knew the Boss had qualms. Back in the mists of time, he’d worked alongside Glen Heaton. McEwan’s take was that the man had done solid work, earned any advancement that came his way. A good officer, for the most part ...

‘Good,’ McEwan said again, even more distantly. He roused himself with a roll of the shoulders. ‘So what else have you got on today?’

‘Odds and ends.’ Fox was blowing his nose again.

‘Have you not shifted that cold yet?’

‘It seems to like me.’

McEwan took another look at his watch. ‘It’s already gone lunch-time. Why not knock off early?’

‘Sir?’

‘Friday afternoon, Foxy. Might have something new starting Monday, so best get those batteries recharged.’ McEwan could see what Fox was thinking. ‘Not Aberdeen,’ he stated.

‘What then?’

‘Could well peter out over the weekend.’ McEwan offered a shrug. ‘We’ll talk Monday.’ He made to move away, but hesitated. ‘What did Heaton say?’

‘He just gave me one of those looks of his.’

‘I’ve seen men run for the hills when he does that.’

‘Not me, Bob.’

‘No, not you.’ McEwan’s face creased into a smile as he made for the far corner of the room and his own desk.

Tony Kaye had tipped back in his chair again. The man had ears as sharp as any bit of electronic kit. ‘If you’re heading off home, leave me that tenner.’

‘What for?’

‘Those drinks you owe us – couple of pints for me and a milkshake for the bairn.’

Joe Naysmith checked that the Boss wasn’t watching, then gave Kaye the finger again.

Malcolm Fox didn’t go home, not straight away. His father was in a care home over to the east of the city, not far from Portobello. Portobello had been quite the place at one time. It was where you’d go at the summer. You’d play on the beach, or walk along the promenade. There’d be ice-cream cones and one-armed bandits and fish and chips. Sandcastles down near the water, where the sand was sticky and pliable. People would be flying kites or tossing sticks into the surf for their dog to retrieve. The water was so cold you’d lose the ability to breathe for the first few seconds, but after that you didn’t want to come out. Parents seated on their stripy deck-chairs, maybe with a windbreak hammered into the sand. Mum would have packed a picnic: the gritty taste of meat paste on thin white bread; warm bottles of Barr’s Cola. Smiles and sunglasses and Dad with his rolled-up trousers.

Malcolm hadn’t taken his dad to the seafront for a couple of years. Some weeks he got the notion, without taking it any further. The old boy wasn’t too steady on his pins – that was what he told himself. He didn’t like to think it was because people might stare at the pair of them: an elderly man, melted ice cream running down the back of his hand from the cone he was holding, being directed towards a bench by his son. They would sit down and Malcolm Fox would wipe the ice cream from his father’s slip-on shoes with his handkerchief, then use that same item to dab at the grey-flecked chin.

No, that wasn’t it at all. Today it was just too cold.

Fox paid more for the care home than he did on his own mortgage. He’d asked his sister to share the burden, and she’d answered that she would when she could. The home was private. Fox had looked at a couple of council alternatives, but they’d been drab and acrid-smelling. Lauder Lodge was better. Some of the money Fox had shelled out had gone into the pot and come out as Anaglypta and pine freshener. He could always smell talcum powder, too, and the lack of any unpleasant aromas from the kitchen was testament to quality venting. He found a parking space round the side of the building and announced himself at the front door. It was a detached Victorian house and would have been worth seven figures

until the recent crunch. There was a waiting area at the foot of the stairs, but one of the staff told him he could go to his father's room.

'You know the way, Mr Fox,' she trilled as he nodded and made for the longer of the two corridors. There was an annexe, built on to the original structure about ten years back. The walls had a few hairline cracks in them and some of the double glazing suffered from condensation, but the rooms were light and airy – the very words he'd been plied with when he'd first inspected the place. Light and airy and no stairs, plus en suites for the lucky few. His dad's name was on a typed sliver of card taped to the door.

Mr M. Fox. M for Mitchell, this being Malcolm's grandmother's maiden name. Mitch: everyone called Malcolm's dad Mitch. It was a good strong name. Fox took a deep breath, knocked and walked in. His dad sat by the window, hands in his lap. He looked a little more gaunt, a little less animated. They were still shaving him, and his hair seemed freshly washed. It was fine and silver, and the sideburns were kept long, the way they'd always been.

'Hiya, Dad,' Fox said, resting against the bed. 'How you doing?'

'Mustn't complain.'

Fox smiled at that, as was expected. You injured your back at the factory where you worked; you were on disability for years; then cancer came along and you got treated successfully, if painfully; your wife died soon after you got the all-clear; and then old age crept in.

And you mustn't complain – because you were the head of the family, the man of the house.

Your son's own marriage broke up after less than a year; he already had a problem with drink, but it got worse then, for a while; your daughter flew far from the nest and kept in touch infrequently, until landing back home with an unlikeable partner in tow.

But you couldn't complain.

At least your room didn't smell of piss, and your son came to see you when he could. He'd done pretty well for himself, all things considered. You never asked if he liked what he did for a living. You never thanked him for the fees he paid on your behalf.

'I forgot to bring you chocolate.'

'The girls fetch it, if I tell them to.'

'Turkish Delight? Not so easy to find these days.'

Mitch Fox nodded slowly, but didn't say anything.

'Has Jude been round?'

'I don't think so.' The eyebrows bunched together. 'When was it I saw her?'

'Since Christmas? Don't fret, I'll ask the staff.'

'I think she *has* been here ... was it last week or the week before?'

Fox realised that he'd taken out his mobile phone. He was pretending to look for messages but actually checking the time. Less than three minutes since he'd locked the car.

'I finally closed that case I was telling you about.' He snapped the phone shut again. 'Met with the Procurator Fiscal this morning – looks like it's going to trial. There's still plenty that can go wrong, though ...'

'Is it Sunday today?'

'Friday, Dad.'

'I keep hearing bells.'

'There's a church round the corner – maybe it's a wedding.' Fox didn't think so: he'd driven past and the place had looked empty. *Why do I do that?* he asked himself. *Why do I lie to him?*

Answer: the easy option.

'How's Mrs Sanderson?' he asked, reaching into his pocket again for his handkerchief.

'She's got a cough. Doesn't want me to catch it.' Mitch Fox paused. 'Are you sure you should be here with those germs of yours?' Then he seemed to think of something. 'It's Friday and it's still light ... Shouldn't you be at work?'

'Time off for good behaviour.' Fox rose to his feet and prowled the room. 'Got everything you need?' He saw a stack of elderly paperbacks on the bedside table: Wilbur Smith; Clive Cussler; Jeffrey Archer – books men were supposed to like. They would have been chosen by the staff; his father had never been much of a reader. The TV was attached to a bracket in a corner of the room, high up towards the ceiling – difficult to watch unless you were in bed. He'd come to visit one time and it had been tuned to the horse-racing, even though his father had never shown an interest – the staff again. The door to the bathroom was ajar. Fox pushed it open and looked in. No bath, but a shower cabinet fitted with a foldaway seat. He could smell Vosene shampoo, same stuff his mum had used on Jude and him when they'd been kids.

'It's nice here, isn't it?' He asked the question out loud, but not so his father could hear. He'd been asking the selfsame thing ever since they'd moved Dad out of the semi-detached house in Morningside. At first, it had been rhetorical; he wasn't so sure now.

The family home had needed to be cleared. Some of the furniture was in Fox's garage. His attic was full of boxes of photographs and other mementoes, the majority of which meant little or nothing to him. For a time, he would bring some with him when he visited, but they upset his father if he couldn't place them. Names he felt he should have known had been wiped from his memory. Items had lost their significance. Tears would well in the old boy's eyes.

'Want to do anything?' Fox asked, seating himself on the edge of the bed again.

'Not really.'

'Watch TV? Cup of tea maybe?'

'I'm all right.' Mitch Fox suddenly fixed his son with a look. 'You're all right, too, aren't you?'

'Never better.'

'Doing well at work?'

'Revered and respected by all who know me.'

'Got a girlfriend?'

'Not at the moment.'

'How long is it since you divorced ...?' The eyebrows knitted again. 'Her name's on the tip of my ...'

'Elaine – and she's ancient history, Dad.'

Mitch Fox nodded and was thoughtful for a moment. 'You've got to be careful, you know.'

'I know.'

'Machinery ... it's not to be trusted.'

'I don't work with machinery, Dad.'

'But all the same ...'

Malcolm Fox pretended to be checking his phone again. 'I can look after myself,' he assured his father. 'Don't you worry about me.'

'Tell Jude to come and see me,' Mitch Fox said. 'She needs to be more careful on those stairs of hers ...'

Malcolm Fox looked up from his phone. 'I'll tell her,' he said.

'What's this Dad tells me about stairs?'

Fox was outside, standing beside his car. It was a silver Volvo S60 with three thousand miles on the clock. His sister had picked up after half a dozen rings, just as he'd been about to end the call.

'You've been to see Mitch?' she surmised.

'He was asking for you.'

'I was there last week.'

‘After you fell down the stairs?’

‘I’m fine. A few bumps and bruises.’

‘Would those bruises be facial, Jude?’

‘You sound just like a cop, Malcolm. I was bringing some stuff downstairs and I fell.’

Fox was silent for a moment, watching the traffic. ‘So how are things otherwise?’

‘I was sorry we didn’t get the chance to catch up over Christmas. Did I thank you for the flowers?’

‘You sent a text at Hogmanay, wished me a Gappy New Year.’

‘I’m hopeless with that phone – the buttons are too small.’

‘Maybe drink had been taken.’

‘Maybe that, too. You still on the wagon?’

‘Five years dry.’

‘No need to sound so smug. How was Mitch?’

Fox decided he’d had enough fresh air; opened the car door and got in. ‘I’m not sure he’s eating enough.’

‘We can’t all have your appetite.’

‘Do you think I should get a doctor to look at him?’

‘Would he thank you for it?’

Fox had taken a packet of mints from the passenger seat; popped one into his mouth. ‘We should get together some night.’

‘Sure.’

‘Just you and me, I mean.’ He listened to his sister’s silence, waiting for her to mention her partner. If she did that, maybe they could have the real conversation, the one they’d been dancing around:

What about Vince?

No, just the two of us.

Why?

Because I know he hits you, Jude, and that makes me want to hit him back.

You’re wrong, Malcolm.

Am I? Want to show me those bruises and the staircase where it’s supposed to have happened?

But all she said was: ‘Okay, then, we’ll do that, yes.’ Soon they were saying their goodbyes and Fox was flipping shut the phone and tossing it across to the other seat. Another wasted opportunity. He started the engine and headed home.

Home being a bungalow in Oxfangs. When he and Elaine had bought the place, the sellers had called it Fairmilehead and the solicitor Colinton – both neighbourhoods seen even then as being

more desirable than Oxfords – but Fox liked Oxfords fine. There were shops and pubs and a library. The city bypass was minutes away. Buses were regular and there were two big supermarkets within a short drive. Fox couldn't blame his father for misplacing Elaine's name. The courtship had lasted six months and the marriage a further ten, all of it six years back. They'd known one another at school, but had lost touch. Met again at an old friend's funeral. Arranged to go for a drink after the meal and fell into bed drunk and filled with lust. 'Lust for life,' she'd called it. Elaine had just come out of a long-term relationship – the word 'rebound' had only occurred to Fox after the wedding. She'd invited her old flame to the ceremony, and he'd come, well dressed and smiling.

A month after the honeymoon (Corfu; they both got sunburn) they'd realised their mistake. She was the one who walked. He'd asked if she wanted the bungalow, but she'd told him it was his, so he'd stayed, redecorating it more to his taste and completing the attic conversion. 'Bachelor beige' had been one friend's description, followed by a warning: 'Watch your life doesn't go the same way.' As Fox turned into the driveway, he wondered what was so wrong with beige. It was just a colour, like any other. Besides which, he'd repainted the front door yellow. He'd put up a couple of mirrors, one in the downstairs hall, one upstairs on the landing. Framed paintings brightened both living and dining room. The toaster in the kitchen was shiny and silver. His duvet cover was a vibrant green and the three-piece suite oxblood.

'Far from beige,' he muttered to himself.

Once inside, he remembered that his briefcase was locked in the car's boot. As soon as you joined the Complaints you were warned: leave *nothing* in open view. He headed out again to fetch it, placing it on the kitchen worktop while he filled the kettle. Plan for the rest of the afternoon: tea and toast and putting his feet up. There was lasagne in the fridge for later. He'd bought half a dozen DVDs in the Zavvi closing-down sale; he could watch one or two this evening, if there was nothing on the box. At one time, Zavvi had been Virgin. Their shops had gone bust. So had the Woolworth's on Lothian Road – Fox had gone there regularly, almost religiously, as a kid, buying toys and sweets when he was younger, then singles and LPs as a teenager. As an adult he'd driven past it a hundred times or more, but never with a reason to stop and go in. There was a daily paper in his briefcase: more doom and gloom for the economy. Maybe that helped explain why one in ten of the population was taking antidepressants. ADHD was on the increase and one in five

primary school kids was overweight and heading for diabetes. The Scottish Parliament had passed its budget at the second attempt, but commentators were saying too many jobs depended on the public sector. Only places like Cuba were worse, apparently. By coincidence, one of the DVDs he'd bought was *Buena Vista Social Club*. Maybe he'd try it tonight: a little bit of Cuba in Oxfords. A little bit of light relief.

Another of the stories in the paper was about a Lithuanian woman. She'd been killed in Brechin, her body dismembered and tossed into the sea, washing up again, piece by piece, along Arbroath beach. Some kids had discovered the head, and now a couple of migrant workers were on trial for her murder. It was the sort of case a lot of cops would relish. Fox hadn't worked more than a handful of murders during his previous life in CID, but he remembered each scene of crime and autopsy. He'd been present when family members had been given the news, or had been escorted into the mortuary to identify their loved ones. The Complaints was a world away from all that, which was why other cops would say that Fox and his colleagues had it easy.

'So how come it doesn't feel easy?' he asked out loud, just as the toaster finished toasting. He took everything – newspaper included – through to the living-room sofa. There wouldn't be much on the TV this time of day, but there was always the BBC news. His gaze shifted to the mantelpiece. There were framed photos there. One showed his mother and father, probably on holiday in the mid-sixties. The other was of Fox himself, not quite a teenager, with his arm around his younger sister as they sat together on a sofa. He got the feeling it was an aunt's house, but didn't know which one. Fox was smiling for the camera, but Jude was interested only in her brother. An image flashed into his mind – she was tumbling down the stairs at her home. What had she been carrying? Empty mugs maybe, or a basket of washing. But then she was at the foot of the stairs, unharmed, and Vince was standing in front of her, bunching a fist. It had happened before, Jude arguing that she'd struck first, or had given as good as she got. *It won't happen again ...*

Fox's appetite had gone, and the tea smelled as if he'd put too much milk in it. His mobile phone sounded an alert: incoming text message. It was from Tony Kaye. He was in the pub with Joe Naysmith.

'Get thee behind me,' Fox said to himself.

Five minutes later, he was looking for his car keys.