

The house was dark. PC Sandra West stared up at it and sighed. The neighbours had called the police – she checked her watch – getting on for an hour earlier, to complain about the noise. What noise, the operator asked.

Screaming.

An argument?

More than likely. It's not fair, the neighbour had said. Not at two in the morning. But what would you expect from people like that?

People like what?

A check on the address had told Sandra exactly what kind of people they were: argumentative drunks. She'd never been there before but other officers had, often, trying to persuade one or other of them to leave the house, to leave each other alone, for everyone's sake. It was depressing how often she encountered couples who had no business being together but who insisted, through screaming rows and bruises and broken teeth that they loved each other. Sandra was forty-six, single and likely to remain so, given her job (which was a passion-killer, never mind what they said about uniforms) and her looks (nothing special, her father had told her once). Generally, she didn't mind. It was peaceful being on her own. She could do what she wanted, when she wanted.

Sandra had a look in the boot of the police car and found a stab vest. Slowly, fumbling, she hauled it around her and did it up. It was stiff and awkward, made to fit someone much taller

than Sandra. Still, it was in the car for a reason. She walked up the path to the front door. Everything was quiet. Hushed.

Maybe one of them had taken the hint and left before the busies arrived. Sandra shone her torch over the window at the unhelpful curtains, then bent and looked through the letterbox. A dark hallway stretched back to the kitchen door. It was quiet and still.

A screaming argument that ended with everyone tucked up in bed an hour later? Not in Sandra's experience. She planted her feet wide apart, knowing that she had enough bulk in her stab vest and overcoat to intimidate anyone who might need it. Then she rapped on the door with the end of her torch.

'Police. Can you open the door, please?'

Silence.

She knocked again, louder, and checked her watch. God, nights were hard work. It was the boredom that wore you down, that and the creeping exhaustion that was difficult to ignore when you weren't busy. She wasn't usually single-crewed but some of her rota were off sick. She never got sick. It was something she took for granted – the colds and viruses and stomach bugs all passed her by. It made her wonder if everyone else was really sick or if they were faking, and whether she was stupid not to do the same. She tried to suppress a yawn with an effort that made her jaw creak. It was tempting to call it in as an LOB. Sandra smiled to herself. It wasn't what they taught you at Hendon, but every police officer knew what it stood for: Load of Bollocks. Then she could get back into the car and go in search of refs. She hadn't eaten for hours, her stomach hollow from it. Knowing her luck, she'd be about to bite into what passed for dinner and her radio would come to life.

The trouble was, there was a kid in the house. You couldn't just walk away without finding out if the kid was safe. Not when there was a history of domestic violence and social services being involved. Chaotic was the word for it: not enough food in the house, patchy attendance

at school, the boy needing clean clothes and haircuts and a good bath. How could you have a kid and not take responsibility for him? OK, Sandra's parents had been short on hugs and they hadn't had a lot of money to spend on her and her brothers, but they'd been reliable and she'd never once gone hungry. Nothing to complain about, even if she had complained at the time.

She bent down again and peered through the letterbox, moving the torch slowly across the narrow field of view this time. It cast stark shadows in the kitchen and across the stairs. But there was something . . . she squinted and changed the angle of the torch, trying to see. There, on the bottom step: light on metal. And again, two steps up. And again, three steps above that.

Knives. Kitchen knives.

They were stuck into the wood of the stairs, point first. All the way up, into the darkness at the top.

Sandra wasn't an imaginative person but she had an overwhelming sense of fear all of a sudden, and she wasn't sure if it was her own or someone else's.

'Hello? Can you hear me? Open the door, please, love. I need to check you're all right.'

Silence.

*Oh shit*, Sandra thought, but not for her own sake, despite being scared at the thought of what might confront her inside the house. *Oh shit something very bad has happened here. Oh shit we probably can't make this one right. Oh shit we should have come out a lot sooner.*

*Oh shit.*

She got on her radio and asked for back-up.

'With you in two minutes,' the dispatcher said, and Sandra thought about two minutes and how long that might be if you were scared, if you were dying. She'd asked for paramedics too, hoping they'd be needed.

The second police car came with two large constables, one of whom put the door in for her. His colleague went past him at speed, checking the rooms on the ground floor.

‘Clear.’

Sandra was halfway up the stairs, listening to her heart and every creak from the bare boards. The torch was slick in her hand.

‘Hello? Anyone here?’

The thunder of police boots on the steps behind her drowned out any sounds she might have heard. Bathroom: filthy in the jumping light from her torch, but no one hiding. A bedroom, piled high with rubbish and dirty clothes. No bed, but there was a pile of blankets on the floor, like a nest. A second bedroom was at the front of the house. It was marginally tidier than the other one, mainly because there was almost no furniture in it apart from a mattress on the floor. Shoes were lined up neatly in one corner and a collection of toiletries stood in another.

The woman was lying across the mattress, half hanging off the edge, a filthy blanket draped across her. Her head was thrown back. Dead, Sandra thought hopelessly, and made herself smile at the small boy who crouched beside the body.

‘Hello, you. We’re the police. Are you all right?’

He was small and dark, his hair hanging over his eyes. He blinked in the light, his eyes darting from her to the officer behind her. He wasn’t crying, and that was somehow worse than if he’d been sobbing. Sandra was bad at guessing children’s ages but she thought he could be eight or nine.

‘What’s your name?’

Instead of answering he huddled closer to the woman. He had pulled one bruised arm so it went around him. It reminded Sandra of an orphaned monkey clinging to a cuddly toy.

‘Can I come a bit closer? I need to check if this lady is all right.’

No reaction. He was staring past her at the officer behind her. She waved a hand behind her back. *Give me some room.*

‘Is this your mummy?’ she whispered.

A nod.

‘Is your daddy here?’

He mouthed a word. *No*. That was good news, Sandra thought.

‘Was he here earlier?’

Another nod.

Sandra inched forward. ‘Did you put that blanket over your mummy?’

‘Keep her warm.’ His voice was hoarse.

‘Good lad. Good idea. And you put something under her head.’

‘Coat.’

‘Brilliant. Can I just check to see if she’s all right?’ Sandra stretched out a gloved hand and touched the woman’s ankle. Her skin was blue in the light of the torch, and even through the latex her skin felt cold.

‘He hurt her.’

‘Who did, darling? Your dad?’

The boy blinked at her. After a long moment, he shook his head slowly, definitely. It would be someone else’s job to find out who had done it, Sandra thought, and was glad it wasn’t her responsibility. The closer she got to the woman on the mattress, the more she could see the damage he’d done to her. And the boy had watched the whole thing, she thought.

‘All right. We’ll help her, shall we?’

His huge, serious eyes were fixed on Sandra’s. She wasn’t usually sentimental, but a sob swelled up from deep in her chest and burst out of her mouth before she could stop it. She held out her arms. ‘Come here, little one.’

He shrank into himself, turning away from her towards his mother. Too much, too soon. She bit her lip. The sound of low voices came from the hall: the paramedics at long last.

‘I’m sorry, but you can’t stay here. We’ve got an ambulance for your mummy. We need to let the ambulance men look after her.’

‘I want to stay. I want to help.’

‘But you can’t.’

The boy gave a long, hostile hiss, a sound that made Sandra catch her breath. The paramedics crashed into the room, carrying their equipment, and shoved her out of the way. She leaned against the wall as they bent over the figure on the mattress. It was as if Sandra had come down with a sudden, terrible illness: her stomach churned and there was a foul taste in her mouth. A cramp caught at her guts but she couldn’t go, not in the filthy bathroom, not in what was going to be a crime scene. She clenched her teeth and prayed, and eventually the pain slackened. A greasy film of sweat coated her limbs. She lifted a hand to her head and let it fall again. What was wrong with her?

The boy had scrambled back when the paramedics crashed into the room. He crouched in the corner of the room among the shoes, those round solemn eyes taking everything in. Sandra watched him watching the men work on his mother’s body, and she shivered without knowing why.