

Driven

"RTA near Dobbies' Garden Centre, Milngavie. Unit ED 16, come in please."

As he switched on his blue light and siren, Tim Blackie checked the time. 17.54. He put his foot to the floor, sweeping aside all the cars ahead of him, 'King of the Road'. This was what he was after, what he had always craved. It was why he had become a policeman.

Tim was scheduled to finish his shift at 19.00 and had a squash Mini-League match scheduled for 20.00. It was tight, but he could make it, he hoped.

The articulated lorry was slewed, blocking both narrow carriageways. It looked undamaged, although its cab was embedded in the hedge, its rear end overhanging the steep drop. It was the second time Tim had been at this spot. First time there had been two deaths and a brain injury, all three occupants under eighteen. The male, aged seventeen, driving his mother's Golf GTI, without permission, without insurance, was making a slow recovery in the Southern General Neurological Unit.

That had been Tim's first time making house calls to impart bad news. The more experienced Gemma had taken the lead. The uncomprehending anguish of the parents had been etched on his brain. Later, sitting in his mother's kitchen, re-telling everything, he had raced to the sink, bringing up the food he had just eaten. That night, alone in his flat, his dreams had been filled with images of the front seat passenger, decapitated. The girl from the rear had not been wearing a seat belt. She had been thrown through the windscreen, her torso lacerated by the shards, causing her to 'bleed out' before she could be saved. Perhaps it might be better if the driver had died, taking his guilt with him to his grave, Gemma had said.

Tim logged his arrival time. 18.02. He was the second responder. Sergeant Neil Jackson and WPC Gemma Brownlee were already on the scene.

The distinctive "Nee-Naw" of an ambulance sounded from behind the lorry, heading to the hospital.

"Aye, Timmy, just in time for the wash-up, son."

Neil gave Tim a synoptic of the incident.

Tim grimaced, recognising their names, the twins, Carlo and Cesare Falco. Their sister Caterina (Cat) had been in his primary class. She had died, aged eleven, after a long fight against childhood leukaemia.

"Two things, Timmy, right? Get the names and details from our other boy racers, those two over there, right? Then check the crash vehicle, get its details, phone them into Control. And make sure you log everything. Then get round A-S-A-P to the parents, right? I don't need another chewing over by big Willie McMaster for the parents getting this off the

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radio before we get to them first. And keep in touch with them, at Control, right? Just in case we need you again."

"So, will Gemma be coming with me, sir?"

"No, son. You're a big boy now. Now *move* it!"

Tim checked the time. 18.09.

The two boys, both seventeen, explained about the rehearsal for the school end of term show, after lessons. Then about the race home, the long way round. About Carlo, trying to overtake them on the brow of the hill. The lorry, head on.

Tim let them take their time, let them tell their tale.

Stephen, the driver, skidding and scraping the car, just stopping at the edge of the road, not dropping over. The slow awareness that they were still alive, unhurt. Then their realisation of what had happened to Carlo and Cesare. Their disbelief.

Andrew, the passenger, his hands fluttering in front of his crotch, trying to hide the urine stains.

Both sobbing, offering their apologies to Tim for their part in it.

Timmy noted their details. The Clio was his Mum's car Stephen explained; he had passed his test two months earlier, at his third attempt. The twins had passed only three weeks ago, both on the same day, at their first attempt. Stephen had permission from his Mum and he was insured, he was certain, because of the high cost. He was unsure about Carlo and Cesare. Probably, they were mega-rich. Their car was a birthday present, to be shared.

Tim checked the time. 18.23. He told the boys to go home, and for Stephen to take his driver's licence and insurance certificate to Milngavie Police Station, within 48 hours.

He scrambled down the grassy slope to the wrecked Alfa Romeo Guilietta. He searched, found the log book, and removed the keys. He bagged and labelled them. He called in the details to Control, got an update on the situation, advised he was on his way to tell the parents.

Tim checked the time. 18.41.

On his way back up the hill he saw a Walkman. It looked nearly new. He tested it, with one earbud.

Led Zeppelin, "*Whole lotta luv*". He bagged and labelled it.

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He turned on the blue light and siren. 18.47.

Because of the lorry, Tim had to go the long way, back down past the queue of drivers trapped by the road block, not daring to cross the double white lines, and in any case afraid to manoeuvre so close to the steep drop.

Near the end of the queue, Guido Falco in his Maserati had his seat reclined, the engine burbling, the air con up full against the early summer heat, his eyes closed, dozing, listening to the Three Tenors at full volume.

Tim knew the address. He had been there once, at Cat's eighth birthday party. It was a private road, quiet. Tim stopped just before the entrance to the long driveway. 18.59. He checked in with Control, listened to all that they had to say, puffed his cheeks and let out a long sigh.

He was shaking, sweating hoping he would not break down and make a mess of it. He had not seen Mrs Francesca Falco since his primary school days, probably not since the party, he couldn't remember.

He checked the time. 19.04. If he could get this done by 19.15 and get the cop car back to the station and into his MX5 and put the foot down, he could make his squash match at 20.00, maybe even get there early enough for a five minute warm-up in the gym.

He re-started the car and crunched up the drive.

He rang the bell. It sounded far, far away.

The yellow Labrador came from somewhere in the garden, barking, bounding round from the side of the house. He kneeled to let the dog lick his face as he clapped it.

'Oh, is it *you* Timmy, how nice. So, you're a policeman now, how nice.'

'Yes, Mrs Falco, yes eh, it's just that, eh.'

Tim's right hand swung out in front of him, dangling the bag with the Walkman.

'Is this Carlo's by any chance? Or Cesare's?'

'Sorry? Why would be it be Carlo's?'

'It's just that I found it, you know, at the scene, and I, eh, eh, sorry.'

'You found it at 'the scene'? Were you at the rehearsal too?'

'No, no, eh. At the crash scene.'

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'Sorry, Timmy, this is not making sense, what crash scene?'

'The twins, Carlo and Cesare, they, eh, spun off the road. Then I found this, eh.'

'Timmy! What crash scene are we talking about? Oh God, Oh God! NO! NO! NO!'

'No, Mrs Falco, it's all right, really, sorry. The twins are fine, just badly shaken. Just a few cuts and bruises. I've spoken to Control. They're on their way home, the boys, in a taxi. We just wanted to let you know. And here is the log book and keys. But the car, well...'

'Timmy, are you **sure** they are OK, you're not just saying this are you?'

'No, no. I mean, yes, they're fine really. Fine. Good. Look, I'm sorry, it all came out wrong. Sorry.'

'Oh Timmy, thanks, thanks.'

Tim was being hugged and smothered in kisses.

'Oh God, I'm going to be sick...!' She ran past him and disappeared through the front door, the dog at her heels.

He was alone. Tim checked: 19.17.

From the car he called into Control, explained, checked he wasn't needed, explained about the squash match, signed off in advance.

He gunned the car down the driveway, glad to escape.

As he swung through the gates, the rear wheels skidding on the pebbles, the Astra was doing over forty, still accelerating. Coming in the opposite direction was the black Maserati, doing fifty, slowing to negotiate the entry.

Tim and Guido both died milliseconds later.

The first vehicle to arrive was a black cab with the twins.

The cars were alight, burning fiercely, unrecognisable.

Two hours later Sergeant Neil Jackson and WPC Gemma Brownlee stood at Edith Blackie's door. Gemma rang the doorbell.

'Who's that at the door?' she said to Frisky, her cat.