

Collared

Mina was enjoying watching Benji the labradoodle puppy cavorting with the other dogs. Beside her, in a wheelchair, her employer was napping in the warm sunshine. Since her massive stroke a year earlier, DCI Lauren Polwarth was making a slow recovery, supported by strong medication for the pain in her paralysed legs. Although it seemed unlikely, the high-flying policewoman was determined to get well and back to work soon.

As Lauren roused herself, Mina said:

'She's such a nice woman, don't you think?'

Mina waited, wondering if Lauren had heard, watching her fiddle with the app on her smartphone to adjust her hidden hearing aids.

'Sorry Mina, I was miles away. What was that you said?'

'The new woman, the one renting at Bedford Gardens. She's so nice, isn't she?'

'Well, maybe. But you never know, do you? From Tranent, or so she says, sounds more Easterhouse than East Lothian to me. Where is she anyway?'

'She got a call on her mobile. The plumber has arrived a day early to fix her washbasin. I said I would keep an eye on Hans for her. He's no bother, not really.'

'Well, he could do with a good brushing, don't you agree? And look at him, just sitting there, never taking his eyes off us. Why is he not chasing around with the other dogs? It's not natural, is it? Well, what do you think?'

'You mean he's 'herding' us, like we're sheep? He is a German Shepherd after all, right?'

'Mina, have you ever seen a collar like that one? Weird or what?'

'Well, it's high-tech, right. Ruth says she can use it to get his attention. Seems Han's is a bit deaf. Maybe we should get one for Benji, make it easier to get him to come back to us, right?'

'*Ouch!*'

'Lauren, what is it? Are your hearing aids acting up again?'

'*Wait!* I can hear them talking. Ruth with two guys. Hey! Oh no! *Oh-My-God!* They're in my house. *Holy Shit!* They've found my safe inside my wardrobe.'

'But isn't it bolted down?'

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'Mina, use Benji's lead to tie that mangy brute of hers to the park bench. I'm going to call this into Govan Control. No point in being a copper if I can't use my contacts, eh?'

'Lauren, you're winding me up, right?'

'Shoosh!'

'Helen, it's me, Lauren Polwarth. Put me through to ACC Macfarlane and quick as you like, please. Tell him it's a burglary in progress.'

'Jimmy, Lauren here. My house is being robbed, as I speak. I'm at the local park with my dog, about three streets away, in my wheelchair. Mina, my care assistant is with me. There are two men called Alf and Bob and a woman calling herself Ruth Mallard on my premises. I've just accessed my front door Blink camera using my phone and saw her loading a dark red Fiat van. The registration plate is blanked with silver duct tape. Mallard was stowing my paintings and my collection of Lladro figurines into shipping boxes. From the chit-chat the two guys are still trying to lever my safe up off its security mountings.'

'What? Yes, I'm still at the same address.'

'What? Yes, of course I'll hold.'

'What? Thanks. Oh, and Jimmy, we have one of the gang here with me, under citizen's arrest. Would you send please someone from the Dog Branch to take him into custody.'

'What? Ha-ha! He's a German Shepherd and goes by the name of 'Hans' although that might be an alias.'

'What? Yes, actually, he *is* wearing a special collar, how did you know?'

'What? Three years?'

'What? Fifty-nine break-ins! Well, looks like we've collared them at last.'

'What? Yes, we'll stay put. Much safer. Thanks. Listening. Out!'

Time passed.

Hans rolled onto his side and fell asleep.

Mina kept glancing towards the park gate.

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The sound of a siren whooping briefly nearby signalled the cavalry arriving at Lauren's bungalow.

Soon after a police dog van entered the park and drove slowly towards them.

A uniformed policewoman got out, holding her finger to her lips.

Her badge read: "PC Wendy Sinclair".

Talking to the dog with quiet authority, PC Sinclair roused Hans, fitted him with a security harness connected to the inside of the van with a long lead. She then placed a muzzle on the dog.

Finally, using latex gloves, she removed the odd-looking collar and placed it in an evidence bag.

Her police radio beeped. Pressing the button, she accepted the call, gave her name and number then listened on her earpiece before replying: 'Will do. Out!'

'DCI Polwarth ma-am, Govan Control say the burglars are now in custody and that it's safe for you to return to your house. A victim support officer is on her way to counsel you. Should be with you in about ten minutes.'

'Thanks, Wendy. *Auf Wiedersehen*, Hans.'

The police van drove away.

'OK, Mina, let's get Benji and go and see what damage they've done!'

'So, Lauren, it was a fault with Han's high-tech collar which connected Ruth to your hearing aids, right?'

'Yes.'

'But their working again now, right?'

'Corrrrr-ect!'