

Left Behind

*The Star-maker says "It ain't so bad!"
The Dream-maker's gonna make you mad
The Spaceman says "Everybody look down,
It's all in your mind!"*

Tristan muttered the chorus of Lola's favourite song; "Spaceman", by The Killers. A bead of sweat rolled along his furrowed brow, then dripped onto the right lens of his plastic-rimmed glasses. The Tube carriage was unbearably hot, crammed with city-boys like sardines in a can. He ruffled his left hand through a thatch of greasy brown hair. Tristan promised himself that he'd move somewhere away from the Central line when his lease was up in November. After a few more torturous minutes he reached his stop, Hanger Lane. As he stood on the platform, Tristan watched the red and white train vanish into the tunnel's gaping maw, leaving three parallel rails stretching into the void. Two carried wheels that would crush you, and the other carried 630 volts.

The night air brought relief as Tristan stepped out into the cold. It had been an Indian summer, with unbearably humid days from May through to mid-September. He picked up the *London Evening Standard* from one of the steel boxes outside all London Underground stations. The headline loudly declared the day's news, which probably wasn't news to anyone. The Conservative Party's new Prime Minister, Philip Hammond, had called for a general election after the loss of yet another seat to the Labour Party in yet another by-election. Tristan groaned with annoyance. He'd voted for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour in June and would probably do the same this time. He didn't care much for politics.

As he wandered the empty streets, on the last leg of his journey home, he thought back to that song. What kind of suicide attempt would result in paramedics taking a blood type? Cutting? Tristan stopped to cross the road, watching the scarlet 483 bus rumble down the road. Maybe the song could be about jumping in front of a car, too. As he walked by the kebab shop at the end of his street, Tristan realised he had no food left in his flat. At least he could pick up some microwave meals from the corner shop.

The interior of Londis was beige and dusty, with the odour of hastily-diluted bleach. In the chiller, next to questionable cheeses and watery milk were a couple of pre-prepared burgers. No, stuff it, Tristan mused to himself. He could get some instant noodles and a carton of eggs. As he walked towards the checkout, he noticed a stand of flowers wilting in the corner. Tomorrow would mark three months since his sister died. Tristan selected the least pathetic-looking bouquet of chrysanthemums and paid. He could visit her grave in the morning.

Kensal Green cemetery was slick with autumn drizzle and fallen leaves, surrounded by bare trees and a seven-foot stone wall. Finding Lola's grave was a challenge, her headstone lost among the sea of those recently deceased. It was fascinating how London, a city so full of life, contained its hidden legion of the dead. Tristan's amusement melted away as his eyes came to rest on a familiar name.

Lola Martins

June 17th 1998

July 28th 2017

Rest in Peace

He fumbled the chrysanthemum stems into the empty vase by Lola's headstone, which was half-filled with rainwater. Tristan sobbed as he crouched low, then clenched his hands into fists as he rose. He bit his lower lip and inhaled deeply through his nose. With the pain came a burning anger. At Lola's boyfriend for dumping her when they left school for different universities. At the flatmates in her halls who got her to take drugs and go out drinking four days a week. At the lecturers who caused her to fail her first year of uni. At Christmas, when they were home with their parents, together for the last time, Lola had been the same bubbly and cheerful girl he'd always known. And now she was buried in Kensal fucking Green.

Tristan wiped his eyes, and walked back towards the entrance. A small crowd had gathered by the gate, a few of whom Tristan recognised. It was the family of Hannah Gardiner, a young woman who had been shot in a Kilburn alley. Tristan had taken statements from the parents at the station. He had needed to ask intrusive questions about Hannah's personal life, whether her boyfriend was in a gang, or whether she owed money to anyone. It had upset her parents, understandably, who knew nothing that could explain why their precious daughter had been killed so senselessly. Tristan looked away as he passed them by, and got on the bus to work.

It was only a fifteen-minute journey from the cemetery to Kilburn Police Station. Tristan checked the clock, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was early for his shift, and one of the advantages of being a detective was not having to change into uniform. He poured a cup of coffee for himself from the communal cafetiere, and knocked on the door of his Inspector's office. The light was on, so Tristan knew she was in.

"Come in!" was the slightly muffled reply. The station wasn't soundproofed, except for the holding cells and interview rooms in the basement. Tristan turned the door handle and planted his mug down on the table set in the centre of the office. Detective Inspector Naomi Barnes sat behind her desk, typing up a report from a previous job. She was a black Jamaican-British woman in her early thirties, with umber-brown skin and light freckles on her cheeks. When she spoke it was obvious that she was a Londoner born and bred south of the river. She leaned around her computer monitor. "Don't mind me, Martins, let me finish up here and I'll be with you."

"I ran into the Gardiner family this morning at Kensal Green cemetery this morning. Not to speak to, mind." Tristan paused carefully, trying to appear composed without allowing Naomi an opportunity to interrupt. "But I wanted to ask you if I could be part of the investigation into Hannah Gardiner's murder. I think it could tie into the W9/NW6 postcode gangs I've been pursuing this year".

"Well, I suppose we could use you on the Gardiner case. Fatimah won't like it, though. You know what she's like, she's protective whenever she thinks a case belongs to her." DI Barnes replied. "But why were you at Kensal Green cemetery? You weren't following them, were you?" she enquired, her tone lowering, as though she were interviewing a suspect. Tristan blushed.

"No, err... I was visiting my sister, Lola. It's been three months..." Tristan's voice evaporated, unable to finish the sentence. He closed his eyes and gulped away the urge to cry. He didn't want to show any weakness in front of his superior.

"I'm so sorry, Tristan." Naomi offered. "I forgot. If you need to take more time off, just say the word and I'll tell the 'Super', I'm sure he'll understand." Tristan sipped his coffee, and held up his left hand in protest.

“No, Naomi... Ma’am. It’s fine, I’m fine. I’m ready to get back to work. Being on a job keeps my mind busy, you know?” Naomi nodded, then offered the cardboard folder containing her report. “Here are mine and Fatimah’s preliminary notes. Forensics and ballistics are in there. Give it a look over and email me any additions you want included on the file by the end of the day.” Tristan took the folder and nodded, draining the dregs from his mug. “Oh, and one last thing, DC Martins...”

“Yes Ma’am?” Tristan replied, on cue.

“It’s good to have you back.” She beamed a warm smile at him, full of pearly teeth. Tristan smiled back, with less enthusiasm.

Tristan left DI Barnes’ office and sat down at his desk with the report. Flicking through the pages of the bundle, Tristan stared at the passport photo of Hannah Gardiner, noting a shock of unruly blonde hair, reminding him of Lola. Hannah was a Caucasian woman, aged 22 years old. She had been shot once in the back of her head, walking across Fernhead Road. The bullet lodged in her skull was a .22 rimfire round, probably fired from a modified “replica” handgun. Any firearms with a barrel shorter than 12 inches were illegal in the United Kingdom, but many street gangs sought out improvised pistols with dangerous, home-made alterations, drilling out the barrels and replacing the firing pins. The crude weapons frequently caused injury to their user as well as the intended victim.

Hannah’s body had been found after some elderly residents had reported a loud bang at 10:30PM. The toxicology screen showed that she had been drinking, with a blood alcohol level slightly over the legal limit for driving. There were no signs of sexual activity, or drug use. Whatever party she was coming home from had been fairly tame. And that summed up Hannah Gardiner. She was tame, respectable, a well-liked local girl. Having stayed on at school until 18, she had achieved good A-level results and was writing for the local newspaper. A couple of her articles had made it to the Guardian. Her boyfriend was a couple of years older, working in an estate agent’s office. He, like Hannah, had a clean criminal record. Not even a parking ticket, which was common in London since few young people drove anywhere. Tristan himself had only learned for the job, two years prior, at 24. His parents, who grew up in rural Berkshire, had both held full licenses by age 20.

Tristan logged into his work PC, and navigated to the networked drive, which held .wav recordings of interviews with both witnesses and suspects in open cases. He had sat next to Naomi and Fatimah Kermani, the other Detective Constable at the station. They had heard the same stories as usual: salt of the earth, loved by everyone she met, bought The Big Issue from homeless people, never hurt a fly. But Tristan believed them. He remembered the anguish that dripped from the eyes of her parents, her boyfriend. It had stirred painful memories within him, feelings still raw. Tristan bit his bottom lip, screwing up his face into a gurn. Then, suddenly, his features relaxed, and he looked around the office, wide eyed, checking that nobody had noticed. They had not.

Hannah hadn’t been in debt. She hadn’t been shagging anyone but her boyfriend. She didn’t have any dodgy mates, or any other skeletons in her closet. She wasn’t hanging out with a gang or any drug dealers. So why had she been shot on a dingy street corner in Westminster? Tristan felt a pang of familiar anguish once again, at this random, senseless murder, which seemingly had no motive whatsoever. His anguish faded into anger, as he clenched the computer mouse, picking it up and tapping it against his desk with a staccato rhythm. This was his moment. The resemblance between Hannah and Lola couldn’t just be coincidental. He was the missing piece the investigation needed. He was the protagonist of the story.

Besides Hannah’s body, and the usual street litter, there was one remaining piece of evidence. In the gutter, twenty feet from her body, lay the spent casing from the round which killed Hannah. It

matched the bullet in her head, and was marked with a thumbprint. If they could find the pistol with a bore which matched the striations on the bullet, and a pin matching the cartridge, they could put away Hannah's killer. That would be like searching for a needle in a haystack, and that meant following the only thread they had: the Westminster Postcode gangs.

Tristan put down the folder of documents, and gazed across the office to the desk of his colleague, DC Kermani. She was seated, checking emails, twirling the diamond-studded ring on her left index finger. Her black hair was elegantly styled into a plait bun, hidden beneath a plain black headscarf. That contradiction perfectly summed up Fatimah Kermani. A devout Muslim, Fatimah lived with her wealthy parents in the affluent Notting Hill district. She didn't take public transport to work. She didn't even have to drive. She was driven by her father's chauffeur. It must be nice to live on daddy's money.

Fatimah didn't have many friends at the station. Tristan found her cold and aloof. Her sheltered upbringing had sent her to exclusive all-girl preparatory schools, and her strict adherence to her faith left her uneasy around men. Fatimah wasn't especially sociable, which made her difficult to connect with outside of the regimented interactions necessary to their work. Fatimah and Tristan had first met at Oxford, where she had read sociology and human geography, while he had studied archaeology. She had lived comfortably, while Tristan had worked in a bar every summer. In his final year, when money was tight, he worked Friday nights during term-time as well.

DI Barnes wasn't on good terms with DC Kermani, either. They had clashed once, over a dismissive comment the latter had made about Christianity. Naomi Barnes was a practising Catholic. Even worse, Naomi had grown up on a rough council estate in Brixton during the late 80s and early 90s. Fatimah's father had been an investment banker, who quit during the game in 1980 after Margaret Thatcher's government introduced the "Right to Buy" scheme, which allowed council tenants to purchase their homes. He had set up a business offering cash incentives to residents if they sold their homes on to lettings agencies, often at highly marked-up values. This gouging had destroyed the community Naomi had grown up in, replacing long-term residents with private-sector renters who might only stay for a year or two. What was more, it had priced ordinary young people like Naomi out of the market altogether and slashed the provision of social housing to the bone. She viewed Kermani senior as a nothing more than a parasite. But she smiled at Fatimah every morning.

Tristan stood, and walked over to Fatimah. She looked up from the screen of her aluminium-framed monitor, and met his gaze with her own.

"What is it, DC Martins?" she asked, disguising a sigh with her breathing. Tristan pretended not to have noticed, and smiled warmly at his colleague.

"DI Barnes has put me on the Hannah Gardiner case, with you." Tristan said, omitting the detail that he had asked specifically to be included. He paused, to allow Fatimah the chance to react. She remained impassive, her eyes moving between Tristan and the computer screen.

"Alright, Tristan. What can you tell me?" she replied. Tristan assumed that sentence ended; "that I don't already know."

"Well, Fatimah, there's no motive we can find. So, she was murdered by a stranger. Someone with a grudge, but someone who's reckless enough not to be sure who they're shooting at. I have a hunch this ties into the postcode gangs." Tristan reported drily.

“Have you told DI Barnes about your little hunch? You know how she feels about them.” DC Kermani retorted with a smirk. But Tristan could see the glint in their eye that told him she knew he was right. Tristan went back to his desk and logged into the database. As Hannah Gardiner had been returning north, he presumed her killer was from the W9 postcode, thinking one of the NW6 crew had strayed onto their turf. DC Martins shook his head. It was a ridiculous thing to murder a person for the street they lived on.

Tristan scrolled through a list of arrest records, checking the names of the arresting officer, the dates, and the address. There it was! On a rainy Saturday in March, Tristan had been walking through Paddington Recreational ground when he had spotted two young men smoking a joint by a children’s play area. Having recognised one of them as a hanger-on of the local gang scene, Tristan had chased him around the park like a mad goose. All those years in the university running club paid off, the boy carried a fair amount of weight and tired quickly. And at the station, he’d accepted a caution for possessing a few wraps of weed, and squealed on his pals from Queen’s Park.

It was a dim Friday evening. The three police officers were crouched behind a row of laurel hedging, its green leaves hiding a thousand sharp branches, which poked the detectives whenever they moved. DI Barnes glared at Tristan, regretting her decision to allow the sting. A young lad, 17 years old, was the bait. He worked occasionally with the police team, testing shopkeepers and off-licences in North London, to see if they’d sell booze without checking for ID. On this dark, dank November evening, he’d be buying an eighth of an ounce of cannabis, which would cost about twenty quid. Naomi hoped she would remember to confiscate it from him when all the excitement was over.

The evening sun cast golden beams through the green arches of oak trees. Autumn was passing Central London by, and the pavements were littered with the first brown leaves of the season. Tristan watched the three hooded figures approach, then nodded to Naomi. She raised her radio to her mouth.

“Two suspects approaching our mark. IC1 male, about 6’, stocky build, wearing dark blue tracksuit and hooded top. Also, IC3 male, 5’9”, skinny with grey tracksuit and black hooded top. ‘Uniform’ to positions.” She said quietly. The uniformed police officers were move to the park exits. The codes indicated that he tall man dressed in blue was Caucasian and the slim man dressed in grey was Black. The youth walked up to the two dealers, pulling out a wad of fivers. The white man reached into his pockets and pulled out a cellophane bag.

“IC1 suspect has class B. IC1 suspect has class B.” Naomi repeated, making sure the backup officers knew which of them to arrest. The skinny friend was there as a lookout. He might be carrying a knife, but the officers were wearing stab-proof vests. Besides, the man might well decide to throw it in the bushes. The three detectives waited, their heads down behind the hedge, as they waited for the exchange to be completed. There was no need put their informant in any danger. Tristan counted to ten, then ducked his head back up above the hedge. The youth was walking away from the dealers.

Tristan leapt over the hedgerow and onto the tarmac footpath, sticks and leaves falling from his arse. DC Kermani was climbing over, behind him. DI Barnes was shouting into her radio. Tristan couldn’t hear either of them, his heartbeat loud in his ears as he slammed his feet against the pavement. Dusk was fading rapidly into night, and he could barely see the two drug dealers as dark silhouettes in the distance. The park was wide, perhaps 400m across. He would have to run around the perimeter. As he stumbled forwards, Martins threw his right shoulder back, in order to regain

his balance. Tristan began to run, pushing down hard with his right leg to steer his strides around the curve of the path. His first breath was sharp and painful, the chill of the night air stinging his lungs. But he was away. Fatimah and Naomi would jog behind, but they had no hope of catching him. As his pace quickened into a sprint, the sound of warbling songbirds was drowned out by the rush of the air as he moved through it. Tristan had covered about half of the distance to the drug dealers before they noticed him, and at first glance, they mistook him for an evening jogger.

As he got closer, the looks over their shoulders became more frequent. The pair were talking between themselves. Then, by the lit path back to the main road, over by the tennis courts, three uniformed police officers rounded the corner.

“Stop, police!” the lead officer shouted. The two young men turned, looked at Tristan as he barrelled towards them, and set off at a sprint across the park. The officers were standing still, extending their batons. Amateurs. They’d be faster with empty hands. Tristan turned onto the grass. His breathing was laboured now, and the ground was a bit uneven beneath his feet. He hoped that the other unit of officers was waiting by the opposite exit. The other two detectives would be closing in, and they could funnel the two suspects into a dead end. Then a dark figure rushed into view, and Tristan groaned.

DC Kermani had caught up with the chase, but DI Barnes was nowhere to be found. Alone, the woman’s slight frame was no obstacle for the two men. She shouted a command to stop, but grey-tracksuit dealer barged into her, knocking her down to the ground. She rolled over onto her back, her headscarf falling away to reveal immaculate black hair for a moment, before it was stained brown by the mud of the soft soil.

Tristan gritted his teeth and pushed on. Left. Right. Left. Closing in. In the gloom, he could barely tell which suspect was which. The one who had barged Fatimah was wearing lighter-coloured clothes. The wrong one. But he was limping now, the collision must have turned over his ankle. He heard Naomi calling into her radio.

“Plod! One of you with me, one with DC Martins, one to DC Kermani!” she screamed. Naomi would see to the injured dealer, while Tristan would have to catch the one carrying the drugs. It hurt to keep pushing, but he needed to catch his man. If Fatimah was hurt, she would never forgive him if he gave up now. Even if it was to check on her. Tristan was much fitter than the man he was chasing, and it was just as well, too. His hamstrings were on fire, but he was catching up. He reached forward, grabbing the hood of his man’s sweatshirt. He pulled it down, revealing the black stubble of a shaven head and a tuft of dark brown hair on top. Some spittle was falling in a string from the corner of the dealer’s mouth. He turned his head back towards Tristan, his eyes wide and bloodshot. Tristan took a deep breath, and lunged into him with his right shoulder.

Black. White. Grey. Sky. Grass. Trees.

The world tumbled by as the two men landed hard onto the ground. Tristan found his feet and planted a knee into the small of the drug dealer’s back. The man was howling, clutching at his shin, scrabbling around in the mud with all four limbs. Tristan clutched his chest with his right hand, his left pinning his opponent’s shoulder. He sucked in a deep breath.

“You’re nicked!” Tristan exclaimed triumphantly. He glanced over his shoulder. The police officer coming to relieve him was some distance away. He would need to control the suspect for a minute, which was dangerous. If his prisoner had a blade, Tristan risked being cut. He was wriggling, so the detective used his weight to stop the man reaching into the front pocket of his sweatshirt.

“Oi, po-po, I ain’t done nahffink!” came the predictable, forlorn cry.

“Shut it, you gang bastard!” came Tristan’s angry retort. “Got a nice, comfy cell for a wasteman like you.” Tristan hoped Fatimah was alright. Until he knew for sure, Tristan knew he would be angry, and he took the brief opportunity he had to vent the emotion at his prisoner. Then came the thunder of a heavy-set police officer arriving with handcuffs.

“Alright mate?” he greeted Tristan. “Can you move out his arm so I can cuff him?”

“Course.” Tristan replied. “Read him his rights.” The police officer cleared his throat, and the clasp on the handcuffs opened with three metallic clicks of its ratchet. His breathing was also laboured, despite not having exerted himself nearly as much as Tristan had. Fat bastard.

“You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence, if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court.” The officer enunciated monotonically, slapping the rotating steel rings around the man’s wrists, one after the other, as Tristan pulled them out from under him. He wasn’t holding a blade.

“Do you understand?” Tristan yelled. “Do you understand?”, the second time of asking being rewarded with a nod. “Is this your first time being arrested?” he enquired, this time eliciting a weak shake of the head from side to side, at the first time of asking. The two officers lifted the suspect off the floor, his front slick with mud. He glared at them, baring his teeth, then spitting on the ground. His face was smeared with sweat and dirt.

They led the suspects across the park, to the exit they had fled towards. There, a waiting pair of police officers were stood by a shut gate. Tristan and his three uniformed officers waited DI Barnes and DC Kermani to join them. Their prisoner had decided to exercise his right to silence. The exhausted DC Martins was relieved. He was much too tired to argue. After a few restful minutes, Naomi emerged triumphantly, the other two officers escorting the other suspect. Fatimah followed behind the quartet, clutching her right arm gingerly. The group stepped out onto a quiet back street, with rows of three-story Victorian townhouses splitting off like the fingers of a hand. Parked about a hundred metres from the park gate was a white Ford Transit van, emblazoned with the emblems of the Metropolitan Police force. The two cuffed suspects were bundled into the back, with an officer each to mind them. The other three officers sat in the cab. The white beast rumbled off into the night.

“I hope that was worthwhile.” Naomi muttered glibly, thinking that Tristan was out of earshot. He turned to look at her, inquisitively, but her eyes were diverted to the floor. She looked up to meet his gaze, and gestured with her head towards Fatimah. The younger woman’s mouth was quivering, and her right arm hung strangely limp. She supported it carefully with her left hand. Tristan looked at his own feet, guiltily.

“I can drive.” Tristan offered glumly. Naomi nodded. The trio approached their unmarked police car, with Tristan’s colleagues sitting together on the back seats. “DI Barnes, can you call up the control room? I’ll head to St Mary’s, yeah?” Tristan asked, not expecting a response. The evening roads were fairly busy as he drove south towards Central London. The nearest Accident and Emergency centre, at St Mary’s Hospital, by Paddington train station, was near a busy set of bars, and would start to become busy as the night wore on. The clock on the dashboard declared the time to be 9:08 PM. Considering how long it would take to drive the mile to hospital, drop off his colleagues, and return the car to the police station, he would not have time to interview one of their suspects before his shift ended at 10PM. He would need to get into the station early tomorrow morning.

The traffic in Westminster was busy. Each time the car stopped and started, Fatimah would wince audibly. Tristan was aware of his colleague's pain and tried to be as gentle with the throttle and brake as possible. By around half-past, they had made it to Paddington. Naomi helped Fatimah leave the car, slowly and delicately. Once the injured detective was completely out of the car, Naomi walked around to the driver's side. Tristan wound down the window.

"Let me look after her, Tristan. Take the car back, go home, have a shower. And I'll see you in the morning." She concluded.

"You sure?" Tristan enquired. "I can drop the car back and stay with you, if either you or Fatimah wants." His flat tone betrayed his intentions. Tristan wanted nothing more than to acquiesce, but felt that most British compulsion, the need to come across as though it was no trouble to help. It was almost a national sense of guilt. Naomi knew well enough.

"No, you go ahead." She sighed. "I'll look after Fatimah. Get some rest. And thanks for the lift." She turned, guiding her hurt colleague into the hospital lobby. Tristan waited for them to disappear out of sight, then drove off into the night.

Tristan turned the key of his front door. Throwing his jacket, keys, phone and wallet on his bed, he stripped off his clothes, starting with his shoes and working upwards. He then stumbled into the shower, and emerged clad with a red towel. He staggered into the kitchen and drew a can of piss-weak Belgian lager from the fridge. He flicked on his TV, set to the BBC News channel. The scandal of the day revealed that British electronics were being dumped in West Africa, where Ghanaians burned electrical cable for the copper they could sell for pennies. Tristan switched it off and finished his beer in silence. His phone declared the alarm set for 7:00 ominously. Tristan staggered into bed.

The morning Tube was always the busiest. The Central line was awful, crammed full of sweaty City workers in a sticky, dim tunnel of aluminium. At least Tristan lived far enough out that he could get a seat, and read the morning *Metro*, London's free morning newspaper. After arriving at the station, Tristan began his daily ritual of making coffee, and sat at his desk. Naomi probably wouldn't be in until around ten, which gave him some time to write a report on the last night's events.

The two prisoners in the cells had been found to possess almost 100 grams of cannabis between them. Far too much for personal use. Combined with the sting, the two lads would be charged with "Possession of a Class B drug, with intent to supply", a crime which carried with it a prison sentence of up to 14 years. The older of the two, a Caucasian 23-year-old from the Harrow Road named Gary Whitley, was also found carrying about £300 in cash. Whitley had "previous", a criminal record with convictions for assault and attempted burglary. He had a reputation for violence and industry within the gang scene. With the results of their little sting, he would go to prison for at least two years. A good result.

The younger man was a Black 19-year-old from Little Venice, named Josiah Ayoade. No previous, not even a caution for shouting in the street. He would be much more likely to get away without a custodial sentence, but his youth and innocence would make him the easier of the two to pump for information. Tristan wanted to interview him as soon as possible, as they. There was just one problem. In childhood, Josiah had been diagnosed a learning disability, and his assigned solicitor was insisting that a social worker be present for any interview. While a person accused of such a serious crime would be high up the pecking order, it would delay Tristan's investigation until that

afternoon, at the earliest.

The hours ticked by. Naomi arrived at about quarter past ten and disappeared quickly behind her door. Her hair was uncharacteristically greasy and unwashed. Beneath her eyes were a series of dark rings, betraying a restless night. Tristan made another batch of coffee. DI Barnes emerged from her office and gratefully accepted the mug DC Martins offered her.

“Fatimah won’t be in for a couple of weeks. She broke her right collarbone and dislocated her elbow.” Naomi reported, her eyes fixed on the black liquid shimmering in her cup. “Now we charge dem skinny *waaastemahn* wid resisting arrest.” Her south-London accent slipping into multicultural slang. She raised her left hand and rubbed at her forehead with a thumb. “Fuck sake... Sorry, Tristan. I know it’s not your fault. I just... I never had an officer hospitalised on my watch before.” Tristan frowned, resting a hand on his superior officer’s shoulder.

“I know, it’s okay, Ma’am. You couldn’t have foreseen what happened to her. It wasn’t your fault.” Tristan soothed her, and Naomi bobbed her head, knowing his platitudes were empty but well-intentioned. The pair drank up their coffee in silence. The morning air felt heavy, as though the expectations were weighing the officers down. Tristan had been trusted to deliver a breakthrough for the Gardiner investigation. These two crooks were small fish in the Westminster gang culture. Martins knew he needed a result. This was the key to catching Lola’s killer.

Lola’s killer? He meant Hannah’s. Tristan shook his head. Time to visit the pondlife.

The interview room was bright, lit by a half-dozen LED bulbs. The two detectives, the suspect, and his solicitor were sat around a rectangular table. DI Barnes placed a Dictaphone on the table, and pushed the “record” button.

“Interview with Gary Whitley commencing at 12:38 PM, Saturday, November 4th. Present in the room are Detective Inspector Naomi Barnes...”

“...And Detective Constable Tristan Martins.”

“Also present is the suspect’s lawyer. Now, Mr Whitley, can you explain to us what brought you to Paddington Recreational Grounds on Friday, November 3rd?” Naomi continued, after their introductions. Gary sat with his features drawn and defiant, his back slouched and hunched over. The man’s hands were unbound, slumped into his lap. After a pause, his solicitor spoke up.

“No comment.”

“Mr Whitley, you were caught in possession of a large quantity of marijuana...” Tristan began.

“Don’t smoke green.” Gary interrupted. “Don’t deal green.” He looked up to stare into Tristan’s eyes as he spoke. Once he had finished, the man licked his upper lip provocatively.

“Don’t give me that gas, Gary.” Naomi quipped, challenging the blatant lie head-on. “You and Mr Ayoade had more than thirty eighths of weed between you were arrested together. You know that shows intent to supply.”

“I never...” Gary began. Tristan slammed a fist onto the table, eliciting a loud crash. A carafe of water wobbled precariously.

“Cut the shit, Gary.”, he barked. “You were carrying that grass. No way you could smoke it all yourself in one night. We saw you make a trade with that boy.” Naomi turned, surprised by her colleague’s outburst. It was unlike him to get so emotional in front of a prisoner. “What bush you hide your blades in then? Come on.” Tristan stared down the young man, glaring menacingly. “If you don’t tell us some kid is gonna find them and cut itself, you get me?” Tristan didn’t flinch, but as he spoke he realised that he must sound like a right prat, trying to use street language that didn’t belong to him.

Gary knew it. He smirked at the officers, then drew his thumb and forefinger across his mouth to indicate silence. Naomi stood first, and left the room. Tristan followed after her, like a puppy on a lead. Uniform could come in and deal with that joker. The door closed, with a thud and a click. Tristan’s pink face glowed. He was embarrassing himself in front of Naomi. It was time to get a grip.

“Tristan, are you going to be able to handle these interviews? If you need to take a break, I can get some of the other officers to cover you for the day.” DI Barnes said, her voice taking an almost motherly tone. Tristan looked into her eyes, hoping to show determination and defiance. He realised that his act was unconvincing. “Anyway, Tristan, your hunch was right. The fingerprints of this Josiah Ayoade are a match for some rizlas found near Hannah Gardiner’s body.”

Tristan’s jaw hung open momentarily, as he caught his breath. The cigarette papers might even have DNA on them that could link him to the scene. He pumped his fist in celebration. This was important leverage to have. Naomi and Tristan nodded, knowing there was nothing more to say. Then they went for lunch.

The social worker rang DI Barnes at quarter past one. She was caught up in traffic, well out in the suburban sprawl of North London. It would be at least another hour before she could make it to Kilburn for an interview. The two detectives were at a café near the station. They could get some tea and biscuits at the posh bakery up the road while they waited. Naomi was studying Tristan’s face, looking for clues. She wondered whether he would he produce another outburst in the next interview. The man seemed distant, lost in thought. He was inscrutable.

Tristan stared into his green tea. Lola had always enjoyed green tea.

“Interview with Josiah Ayoade commencing at 3:27 PM, Saturday, November 4th. Present in the room are Detective Inspector Naomi Barnes...”

“...And Detective Constable Tristan Martins.”

“Also present in the room are Mr Ayoade’s solicitor, his psychiatrist, and his social worker.” DI Barnes continued monotonically, unsuccessfully hiding her annoyance at the intrusion of the shrink into her interview. Social Services had a habit of sticking their nose into cases that were open and shut, then making accusations about officers that stopped them making progress with related investigations. Naomi had a habit of making her opinions known. “Now, Mr Ayoade, can you tell us where you were on Friday, November 3rd?” She smiled at the suspect, hoping to disarm him with a flash of pearly whites.

“I were checkin’ out the fresh creps on fedman there!” Josiah replied, grinning, and pointing a finger at Tristan, who was wearing blue leather brogues. Tristan fidgeted nervously. Yesterday he’d been wearing running shoes. “Nike, Air Max 90, Essential iD!” Josiah chuckled softly, tapping his

leg down by his foot. The two detectives were unimpressed by the display. “In Paddington Rec, yea? Meeting with bredrin an’ ting. I’s telling you, I ain’t done any-ting. Just chilling out with me fam.” Josiah warbled, grinning like a mischievous child. Tristan cocked his head to glance at his superior, but her gaze was fixed on the suspect. She had grown up in London. She knew the language.

“So, Mr Ayoade, when you were arrested, you were found to be in possession of a large quantity of the class B illegal drug cannabis. Can you tell us how you came to be in possession of it?” Naomi continued.

“What, weed? Weed ain’t illegal, is it?” Josiah looked at his social worker, surprised by the accusation. He clearly didn’t understand what was going on. Sweat was glistening on his upper lip. A hush fell over the room, each person unsure how to follow such a trivially false statement. It was Tristan who broke the silence.

“But you know that murder is, don’t you, Josiah?” his intonation precise and slow, as though he were talking with a child. The suspect looked blankly at him, nodding his head slowly and carefully. “We found the fag papers you lost on Fernhead road, didn’t you?” Tristan’s anger had gotten the better of his grammar. Aoyade’s smile had faded, and his lawyer looked concerned. “You like to act like a muppet, but you’re a killer, aren’t you? You shot a girl, Josiah. You killed her.” Tristan accentuated each of the three accusatory words like they were sentences of their own.

“I weren’t me, honest.” Josiah was whimpering. His three chaperones glared at Tristan.

“You’re upsetting him, DC Martins.” the psychiatrist interjected weakly, as though scolding a naughty child herself. She was a grey woman, tall and thin. Corduroy coat. Who wore corduroy in London? DI Barnes shook her head. The trap she’d planned had been sprung by Tristan’s bluster.

“I don’t care. It upsets me when women are murdered in the street.” Tristan snapped back. “Where’s the gun, Josiah? Did you keep it? I wouldn’t blame you if you chucked it in a bush, y’know. Did it feel like you imagined?” Josiah sobbed loudly.

“DC Martins, if you do not stop this interview now, I will be forced to report this incident to the police complaints commission.” Aoyade’s solicitor demanded.

“Shut it, you nonce.” Tristan snapped back.

“DC *Martins*...” DI Barnes coughed, nudging her colleague with her elbow. Josiah Aoyade’s tears were streaming now, and his torso shuddered violently. He was howling. The social worker was patting him gently on the shoulder, attempting to soothe him. After the third rub, he managed to form a sentence.

“It weren’t me. It weren’t me.” Two for the price of one. “I didn’t shoot her. It were Derek Evans who did.” Tristan looked up to face the prisoner, surprise written across his face. Sarah Evans was a young woman who’d been mugged in Brent back in Easter. Derek was her younger brother. Tristan remembered him from the investigation. They hadn’t managed to catch her attacker. Derek was a bit rough, but Tristan hadn’t seen anything connecting him to the W9 gang.

“What, Evans?” Tristan was astonished. “Did he think the girl had mugged his sister?” Josiah shook his head.

“It weren’t her. He thought it were one of N-dubz lot. She had a hood up, he couldn’t see.” Josiah was apologetic, realising the importance of what he’d seen. “You can’t tell anyone. I’m not a grass. Don’t tell anyone I told you, please... I’m begging you!” His hands were clasped together, pleading with Tristan.

“Do you know Mr Evans’ address?” Naomi asked. Josiah’s mouth wobbled.

“WHERE DOES DEREK EVANS LIVE?” Tristan yelled. All eyes in the room turned to him. Josiah choked back a sob.

“Fifth Avenue. Number twelve.” Tristan rose to his feet, knocking over the folding chair he’d been sat on. Naomi looked at him. Tristan ran out of the room.

“DC Martins!” Get back in here!” DI Barnes called. But Tristan was gone.

Naomi ran up the steel stairs into the station hall. There were files strewn about the office, which Tristan must have knocked off one of the desks. She carried on out of the door. Tristan was leaning against an unmarked police car, struggling to get the key in the lock. Naomi pulled on the officer’s shoulder, and Tristan slumped down against the driver’s door.

Tristan picked up the letters from the floor. The hearing with the Independent Police Complaints Commission was coming up soon, due before Christmas. Today was Tristan’s first day back at the station. It was a red letter day, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was coming to the station for a photo op. DC Kermani was having an award presented for her bravery. Tristan was supposed to be receiving one too, but, well, that wasn’t happening now, was it?

Derek Evans was being held on remand for the murder of Hannah Gardiner. When CID had raided his flat, he’d put a .22 calibre pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger. But the gun had jammed. Evans had been caught with almost twenty grand worth of Class A drugs, and the paraphernalia to go with it. Tristan was furious. It should have been his collar. It was his nous that had led the investigation to the Westminster gangs. He was the one who had chased the Paddington Rec dealers.

Tristan got dressed, and got on the bus to Kensal Green. It was time to tell Lola. She’d understand why he was considering quitting the force. It was always better to jump before you were pushed. But he wouldn’t tell DI Barnes until he’d had a chat with Lola first. It was a crisp, still morning. There was a heavy frost on the ground, which was rare for London. The red double-decker bus was full of young mums whose kids had colds.

Lola’s grave was strewn with wilted flowers. Tristan bit his lower lip, and piled the detritus into the empty vase. He could dump them into a bin as he left. As he stared at the grey stone, Tristan felt a sense of shame washing over him, like waves on the beach. He wished that he’d listened to Naomi. Thinking about the prospect of Christmas without Lola stung Tristan. He was planning to head back to Berkshire, so he could stay with his family. Tristan didn’t know how he could explain the Hannah Gardiner murder to his parents. But at least the case was closed now. And just like Lola, he could finally be at peace.