

Chapter 1

Short, sharp, shock

Rose was at the back, quietly looking through the window. My mother was in the passenger seat. Neither said a word, yet both were equally worried. Nothing preoccupied me, although I was annoyed and didn't feel in the least like going. The car was on its way to Bexleyheath Magistrates Court. I was expected in the courtrooms, again.

I had already turned eighteen, but was used to being treated as a minor. This appearance would be no different. Smart, cunning and awfully cocky, I knew from the occasions they had managed to catch me, the punishment was never too bad. Just a couple of days off the streets.

In a sense, it felt like a rest from all the other shit out there in the cruel world I had to face every day. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't a peaceful retreat. There was as much shit inside as there was outside, just without the freedom.

But how else could I take it? After all, I had been secluded for most of my life since I was eight-years-old.

The weekend would be slow and tedious, sometimes awfully and physically painful. The body never really gets used to the abuse, but the head learns to numb it just enough to keep going.

And this time was only going to be two or three days, like many occasions before. Then I would see the daylight again.

I was optimistic, exceptionally positive and had a certain peace of mind, because this day was different. It was the last day I would be called into the courtroom. I had always wanted to go overseas. There was not much travelling in trafficking small goods, and I was stuck among the wrong sort of people to aim for any success. But I desperately wanted to travel overseas. It was more than a craving; it was a vital need. I always knew in my mind that I would do it, but I knew it wouldn't happen from where I was then.

I saw an ad in a newspaper for a job working as a salesperson in Pakistan and other countries. It brightened my eyes. I didn't need to think twice about applying for the position, despite believing it was far beyond my reach as an eighteen-year-old, uncontrollable rogue. I was called for an interview, and I found myself in a big room with what looked like about three hundred or more other candidates, all well dressed and much older than me.

All of them walked around with a firm step and an air of knowledge and expertise. I thought I didn't stand a chance. But I was there, and despite feeling intimidated and somewhat scared, I also realised that there is no risk when there is nothing to lose. So, I decided to stay.

A couple of guys gave us a speech for an hour or more, explaining what the job was about. Then one of them said to the crowd: "Take the pen and paper and write your name on it, with the reason why we should choose you".

I had not the slightest idea of why they would choose me. I looked around and saw all of these older, much more

experienced men and women writing on their papers. Some of them had a look of confidence; others would meditate over an answer.

A couple of them, two rows to my right, looked worried. I took the pen and wrote: "Just give me a chance and I'll show you I can do it."

They picked up four pieces of paper with the chosen candidates and said the names aloud, everybody in the room waited with bated breath for their name to be called. Mine was among the chosen four. In two weeks I would be travelling to Pakistan. I confirmed to myself once again that I could do anything as long as I put my mind to it. I felt invincible.

I felt invincible every time I stepped into a courtroom, which was a regular occurrence with me. In fact, trips to court had become a big part of my life's routine. I would be called before the magistrate, and they would scold me, tap me on my hand for my bad behaviour, and give me yet another weekend in the juvenile detention centre.

I left the car in the rear car park, by the shopping centre. We walked around the building to the main entrance. It was a grey block of concrete with three storeys adjusting to the terrain levels. Sometimes I thought that it must have been the same architects that had built the Ferrier Housing Estate. The main door was on the third level from the parking lot but in the second one from the front street. A long set of steps raised from one of the corners of the block, narrowing as it reached the top and escorted at each side by a steel handrail that stood out with its bright red paint. The three of us walked up the stairs. My mum was worried and muttering some advice and warnings about my behaviour in court. My sister was silent as I bounced eagerly up every second step. Let's just get this over and done with, I

thought. Hands inside my pockets, I wore a bored look whilst staring down at the floor, muttering and cursing the police, the court staff and whoever the fuck else had put charges against me and was wasting my time like this.

I presented myself to the court guards, and they took me to the waiting room. My mum and sister would be seated inside courtroom number three, to wait for my hearing. My turn soon came, and I was summoned; a policeman asked me to accompany him with a dull gesture, and another one grabbed my arm tight enough to make me twist in protest. He shook my arm violently and looked at me sternly. I was smart enough to know retaliating would not help me out of that place any faster.

The policeman pushed me all the way down the aisle to the courtroom. My mum and my sister were anxiously waiting on the wooden viewing platform. My mind was somewhere else; I was impatient and bothered. I would get a weekend sentence, and then be flying to Pakistan, to my new life. I needed that stupid judge to do his job fast. I was eighteen years old, untouchable and in a hurry.

The judge looked at me. My arrogance and haughtiness shone through my well-rehearsed feline smile. “Come on, get on with it, you fucking faggot; I need to go home and pack my suitcase,” I muttered. The room was so familiar by then it caused no fear in me at all. It was plain and dull, a mere part of my life's routine. There was no real worry, I had faced worse, but the obnoxiousness of the process really bothered me. I needed to get out of there and start again, overseas. I made it, in front of a few hundred fucking twats in bloody suits. I had outsmarted them all and got the job. In the afternoon I would be holding my passport and off.

A judge's frown never impressed me. A Cheshire cat smile

would draw almost unconsciously on my face. “You can't get me. Fucking get on with it, give me your pathetic punishment so I can get out of here.”

Finally, the judge spoke. "Enough is enough. I'm going to give you three months in the juvenile detention centre. It's called a 'short, sharp shock.' You'll either straighten up and turn your life around, or you'll spend the rest of your life in and out of jail."

There was no time in between the words and the gavel hitting the block. The words echoed around inside my head. I lost my peripheral vision. I saw the gavel and heard the thump of it on the wooden block, and everything in my surroundings disappeared. I could hear my mother shouting, screaming emotionally and crying. I could hear she was there, but I couldn't see her. I was blank. I had awoken into a nightmare.

My pupils were frozen on a distant point. All of a sudden I had tunnel vision, seeing nothing but a space in which I didn't belong anymore. I felt someone grabbing me violently by the arm, the fingers digging into my flesh felt like a memory of pain that my body couldn't summon. All was silent and empty within, but in the far distance I heard the sobbing and cries of females voices.

I knew they belonged to my mother and my sister, but I couldn't connect them in my mind firmly enough to produce an emotion. My mind was motionless. I was somewhere else, in a limbo of things that cannot be because they defy the possibility of their own existence. And yet I was there, and I was me, defeated by a judge in a bad dream that I still could not conceive as a reality.

It was then the fear shook my body, and I was brought back for a second to my senses. I was pushed into a cell and asked to take my shoes off and put the shoelaces on a metal table.

I sat down in the cell staring at the floor, seeing nothing but grey, dirty, dull and colourless surroundings. On the wall, names were engraved on the cement, etched out with anxious hands trembling with fear or rage. Beside the names were profanities carved out with whatever object could be found in the cell, created by souls shrunk by depravation. I was paralysed in terror. Everything was gone. I had been invincible. I had cheated death as many times as I had cheated the law. No one could get me. I could laugh in Death's face and say, "fuck you , you won't get me." But that gavel did it. The thump resonated in my head. Three months. Bang. Three months. Bang. Three months.

It was not the weekend away that I had become used to and was expecting. Three months was a lifetime. Yet, I couldn't cry. You cannot cry in dreams. The meaning of reality was inverted, my senses could not accept the solidity of the prison cell, the bars, the cold floor, the putrid smell, not even my own body, which I could hardly feel. My mind was blocked and blank. I couldn't work out if it was despair or fear that was covering my brain like sticky tar. In my head, I could only summon with my stupefied eyes the grey concrete floor of the prison cell and a sense of doom in my heart.

Time elapsed, and it felt like an eternity of inaction. Every now and then I would regather my sanity to realise they were finishing the paperwork before taking me to the juvenile detention centre, Feltham Young Offenders Institution. I would then gasp in panic and incredulity knowing that I had lost my freedom, and my chance to travel to Pakistan.

Then my mind would go blank again, and I could only hear the gavel, like a dull thud, over and over in my head, on the grey concrete, on the cell bars. Three months and all lost.

A policeman came to the cell. I heard his steps and his voice but

couldn't make sense of it. He snapped at me sternly: "Come on, move! Let's go!" and I was back to the physical cell, the tangible space my body was shaking in, the raw reality my mind was avoiding. The nightmare took a harder consistency, one that you can touch. While in shock, it was there like a sledgehammer banging the chest so hard it had numbed my whole body and became ethereal to my mind, but now it took over everything, and I could see, and the dread and fear sank deep in my heart.

I was led to the van. There were several cages. I was forced into one, my body could hardly move inside. An armoured wall with just a small hole breaching its integrity was my only passage to the world I was leaving behind.

I kneeled on the hard plastic that pretended to be a seat inside my cage and looked through the window. It might have been the darkness of my birdcage or the realisation of where I had ended up, but the grey of South London's sky seemed to shine. People walking and breathing at will on the street. My eyes, which minutes earlier were numb and dead and focused on nothing, suddenly sighted happiness in people's bodies as they moved with no greater purpose than getting to their destination.

The beauty of a couple holding hands suddenly stirred my heart as never before, in jealousy and sorrow. The fear became sadness, then fear, then sadness again. There was silence as the van set off for Feltham Young Offenders' Institution.