

Lima Alpha Foxtrot

The water racing down Jackie's face formed salty rivulets as it joined her unrelenting tears. It was proving impossible to wash away the heaviness of her grief, however much shampoo and hot water she employed.

'Come on now; pull yourself together,' her inner voice commanded. 'You need to be strong.'

Briefly transfixed by the spiralling suds as they disappeared down the drain, Jackie forced her attention back to the present and dug deep to summon her last ounce of resolve. Reluctantly, she left the relative safety of the bathroom, which had at least afforded her the minor luxury of being able to keep her thoughts to herself. Clutching her towel around her with one hand, she opened the bedroom door with the other and her eyes at once locked with Peter's. An unspoken moment of shared understanding hung between them, threatening to spark yet another deluge. Shrouded in silence, they each went about dressing, both quietly longing to simply hide away and nurse their sorrow in soft jogging bottoms and the warm, familiar hug of an old sweater. Not today though. Quite simply not the proper attire for such an occasion.

The journey was no less painful for its familiarity but thankfully needed little concentration. Their car could almost travel there on autopilot, which was just as well under the circumstances, with both their minds firmly occupied elsewhere. The austerity of the entrance gate was a fitting match for their mood and yet Jackie could not ignore the little flutter in the pit of her stomach. Anticipation? Excitement? She struggled to put her finger on the feeling.

Once parked, the couple smoothed down their hair and clothing. Painting on the vague resemblance of a smile and swallowing down pain that threatened to claw its way out from their very insides, they stepped out onto the parade ground. Shivering in the thin sunshine, Jackie longed once again for a cosy jumper to replace her smart blouse and jacket. Mind you, it had been a great many years since she had felt properly warm. The Chief Constable greeted them sincerely as they took their seats amongst the invited dignitaries and began watching the officers as they marched smartly out onto the parade ground.

Jackie was at once transported back in time. Playing back, like a flickering cine film in her mind's eye, she visualised her beautiful daughter. Jackie saw the impishly proud smile playing on her face as she looked directly at the camera before turning away to receive her 'Top Student' award. Those piercing eyes so full of life! Young, fit and strong – the epitome of health. Cheers had rung out in an enthusiastic demonstration of how well-liked and hugely respected she was amongst her peers. A career in the police had been her unwavering dream, and there she was at the very outset, brimming with hope and fierce ambition. Loud applause snapped Jackie rudely back into the present as an accolade rang out for a different officer starting her career, no doubt equally as excited and full of anticipation. Ready and willing to serve the public. Naïve, some people might suggest.

Looking over at his wife of forty years, Peter's voice, when it came, was soft.

'Come on girl. Time for our part in all this. Stay with me in the here and now for a while.'

Peter had also been stuck waist deep wading through the past all week in the lead up to this day. Bittersweet memories of a small life that had burst impactfully into his own, changing his future from single man to instant Dad in the space of six short and eventful months. He had fallen in love with Jackie, who arrived as a package with this effervescent toddler in tow. Peter had continued to thank his lucky stars every day for this unexpected gift of family life and the opportunity to support this

special young woman into adulthood. He was as true a father to Katie as if she had shared his genes. Blood proved not to be thicker than water in this relationship.

‘We are proud to present this year’s award in memory of Katie Brown,’ boomed the confident voice of the Chief Constable over the PA system. ‘This goes to the officer in this intake who has shown hard work and perseverance beyond expectation to overcome many challenges during their training. I would like to invite Katie’s parents up to the podium to make the presentation.’

On legs that threatened to buckle and holding onto one another for dear life, the couple made their way out from their seats to take their place in front of the audience. Uprturned faces tracked their conspicuously unsteady journey to the stand. The air of expectation was palpable.

Amongst the audience sat another married couple; proud parents of one of the new officers. To one side of them sat the officer’s partner, to the other, her younger sister. Each of them wore their pride so clearly that it may as well be tattooed on their foreheads! Along the same row, fidgeting nervously and clearly anxious at being in the company of so many members of the police force, let alone the woman he had abandoned so many years before, perched the officer’s biological father. Unlike his ex-wife, he was here under duress, his attendance borne out of a sense of duty rather than pride. More proof, it seems, to back up the hypothesis that blood is not always thicker than water.

Collectively, these parents knew that their daughter had found the training extremely tough. It was quite frankly it was nothing short of miraculous that she had made it through to the end of the gruelling twelve-week course. Hours of determined revision and endless encouragement, along with a mountain of positive self-talk, had somehow combined to propel Laura forward to this point.

Inhaling shakily, Jackie paused to look up, then began to read from her prepared notes. There was an implicit sadness that tinged these words of congratulation; the searing grief of her own loss invisibly etched in each syllable. The intention of this tribute, an attempt to compensate the senseless absence of her only daughter, felt futile in the face of such a tragedy. The obituary had been simplistic in comparison to the enormity of the loss. ‘Gone too soon aged thirty-nine. Lost in the line of duty.’

‘The Katie Brown Award this year goes to a young woman who has shown courage in the face of adversity,’ Jackie spoke out as clearly as she could, determined not to let the tone of her voice betray the tumult of her feelings. ‘I am reliably informed that this officer fully deserves this trophy in recognition of her tenacity and resilience. I would like to call forward Police Constable Laura Davis.’

A monumental cheer erupted from Laura’s cohort. For the length of a heartbeat, Laura felt rooted to the ground in disbelief before marching forward to accept her hard-won prize. There was something unmistakable in the proud smile that she directed towards her parents; the liveliness dancing in her hazel eyes, the look of pride and expectation on her face and then the reassuring heat of her gentle hand as she reached out to meet the cold and trembling one offered up by Jackie. This individual was special. This person was warming Jackie’s heart with both her touch and her humble demeanour. This young woman was reminding her of feelings she had long thought to be lost and buried along with her precious Katie. With a dynamic salute, Laura turned smartly on her heels to march back to the ranks. She looked for all the world as if she had grown slightly taller during that brief, but heartfelt exchange.

With the formalities of the ceremony over and in the more relaxed aftermath of the social gathering that followed, Laura’s Mum sought out Jackie and Peter to thank them for the recognition of their daughter’s endeavours that Katie’s award represented. The conversation flowed easily between the

two women, bearing none of the awkwardness that sometimes interferes with such first encounters. Two Mums, two vastly different sets of circumstances and yet a real feeling of commonality surrounded them. Jackie felt herself relaxing slightly, tentatively allowing herself to open-up to this family. Their willingness to speak candidly about the Browns experiences was such a welcome relief to her. To be able to share feelings that often caused stilted conversation, to be open about the rawness and pain of their loss, felt like more of an acknowledgement of Katie's existence and worth than they had felt for what seemed an absolute eternity. The expressions of gratitude rang out from the Davis's at the way that from the tragedy of losing a loved one something so priceless could emerge. For the Browns, they were finding comfort in being able to leave a legacy where Katie's achievements could live on in the next generation of police officers as they stepped in to continue where she had been so prematurely forced to leave off. From profound loss, new hope. Out of devastation, the foundations of being able to find acceptance and the promise of new friendships.