BEING
BILLY

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phil earle

PROLOGUE

The light in the hall gave the game away.

Eleven p.m. and it was still on. If they were home, they would be in bed and all the lights would be off.

No, I knew this meant they were away. Even if they had gone to the pub, they'd have been back. Work tomorrow and all that.

I scuttled towards the front door, trying to stick to the shadows, turning the rock over in my hand. But as I reached the door, I decided to try the key. Don't know why. After all, it'd been years since I left. Surely they'd have changed the locks? They weren't the sort to take risks. They'd made that only too clear.

So when the key turned in the lock I was pretty stunned.

Not wanting to draw attention to the open door, I chucked the rock back on to the garden and stepped inside, closing the door quietly.

Leaning against the wall, I shut my eyes and listened.

Aside from the ticking clock and the humming of the fridge – silence.

It was beyond perfection. Slipping off my trainers, I

picked my way along the hall, smiling as I clocked the timer switch on the lamp.

I popped my head around the door of the kitchen and dining room. Nothing had changed. It was as if time had stopped three years ago and had only kicked in when I'd closed the front door seconds ago.

I reached the lounge, but paused when my hand touched the door handle. Something stopped me from going in. Memories, I suppose. Too much had gone on in that room and none of it good.

Instead, I turned to the stairs and crawled up them, keeping my head below the level of the window on the landing. You never knew who was twitching their curtains, even late at night.

I didn't pause at the top of the stairs.

I knew where I wanted to go.

Why I was here.

I padded past the photos of Jan and Grant that still hung on the wall, past the cheap tasteless prints that they loved, to the bedroom door.

Without pausing, I pushed my way inside, and suddenly my senses were on fire.

Even though everything about the room was different, it still felt the same. It still felt like mine.

The posters had gone of course, only tiny traces of Blu-Tack remained, pockmarking the wall at irregular intervals. Grant never did finish jobs properly.

Everything was neutral. The bedding, curtains, even the carpet, a deathly beige. It was as if the only way they could

reclaim the room from me was to make everything completely nondescript. A blank canvas.

It didn't matter. I knew where I was. When I closed my eyes, I could still see the City team photo stuck above my bed. Still hear the music pumping out from the windowsill. Still smell the overpowering whiff of Lynx deodorant.

I allowed myself a smile as I fell on to the bed, and as my head sank into the pillow I felt the first of the knots untie in my stomach.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, knot after knot after knot released. I could feel the tension lifting out of me, like it was fog rising. And with it came clarity, and for the first time in months, maybe years, I allowed sleep to come without fighting it.

Because I knew where I was.

I knew I was safe.

I knew I was home.

CHAPTER 1

I should have realized they'd call the police when they found me missing.

Unfortunately, this didn't dawn on me until I was face down on the hallway floor, arms pinned at my sides, crucifixion-style.

'You're really getting a buzz out of this, aren't you?' I spat at them. 'This what you do when you're not on duty, pin down kids for kicks?'

'If you think we're enjoying this, Billy, then you are sadly mistaken,' rasped the Colonel, the strain showing in his voice. 'As soon as you calm down, then we'll be happy to let go. But while you're angry, we have no option but to hold you. It's for your own good.'

I knew the drill, had been here more times in the last eight years than I cared to remember, but I wasn't ready to calm down. I wanted to hurt them in some way.

Any way I could.

So I let my breathing slow, muscles relaxing in the process. At first their grip remained tight, forcing my wrists and ankles into the floor, but after about thirty seconds, I felt the pressure on my left arm relax.

It wasn't the Colonel. He knew me too well. He was hanging on for round two.

It was the other guy, the new bod, all social-work speak and sympathetic smiles.

He made the mistake of getting into range, craning round into my eyeline, trying to talk me all the way down.

Big mistake.

Instinctively, I let one go at him. Not a lungful. Not my greatest effort. But enough to catch him flush in the face as he began to speak.

Caught *him* off guard in a big way, but not the Colonel.

As the newbie stumbled away in disgust, my arm went instantly up my back, forcing my head straight back into the floor.

'That's ENOUGH, Billy!' he yelled into my ear.

'Then tell the scum to keep away from me. I don't need to hear his university bollocks.'

I felt my arm go further up my back.

'They teach you this move in the army, Ronnie?' I gasped. 'Good to know you were a decent soldier, cos you're a crappy carer.'

'Blimey, thanks, Bill.' Although I couldn't see him, I knew he was sweating heavily. 'That's just about the nicest thing you've ever said to me.'

'Up yours.'

The Colonel didn't bother swapping more compliments; he needed to catch his breath.

And, in all honesty, I wasn't up for it any more. I'd scored my point on the new scummer and was ready to move on.

Instead, I kept my forehead pressed into the lino, smelling

the disinfectant that Ronnie had spread everywhere before the rest of the kids woke up. You can take a man out of the army, but you can't take the army out of a man (his words, not mine).

No, I just lay there, regretting my mistake.

I should have realized that of all the carers in the home, Ronnie was the one who would bother checking I was in my bed last night.

The others never bother. Once we're in our rooms, they're happy to crack on with their game of chess from the last sleepover, or get stuck into the bottle of wine that they'd smuggled in.

But not Ronnie. Nothing went unnoticed on his shift. Everything was run with precision, exactly the way he was taught in the barracks.

A place for everything and everything in its place.

This is the man who would set the table for tomorrow's breakfast while we were swallowing the last mouthful of our dinner, as it saved him minutes the following morning. Yeah, I know, very homely.

He was the Colonel, a legend in his own lunchtime, hated by all, staff included.

And the sad thing was, he was the closest thing I had to a parent.

'If you've calmed down, Billy, I'm prepared to let go,' Ronnie wheezed. 'But if you're still going to display such aggression, then we'll have to sit here a while longer.'

'I'm not the one sitting on a fourteen-year-old's back, so who's the one being aggressive? I don't think it's me, scum.'

He laid on a dramatic sigh.

'Billy, I don't know how many times we have to go over this, my friend. I don't derive any pleasure from this. The reason you are being restrained is simple. You were posing a threat. To the other kids, to me and the other carers, and most importantly to yourself. You walked in that door, after absconding for twelve hours, full of anger. All we did was ask where you'd been. I hardly think that's a reason for throwing a glass at me. We've been worried about you.'

Only cos I ran on your shift, I thought to myself.

It never looked good to those in the office to hear that one of the residents had bolted on your watch. Least of all me.

Didn't earn you any brownie points, that one.

'Well, I'm back now, aren't I? Back to spread a little bit of happiness before you piss off for the day.'

'Oh, I won't be leaving any time soon. Your disappearing has caused me a whole load of paperwork. I've the police to contact, your social worker. Then there's this restraint to write up. And if you hadn't forgotten, it's your case review on Friday. It's my job to try and get you settled somewhere permanent again. Not easy to do, my friend, not easy at all.'

The rest of my fight slipped away as Ronnie mentioned the dreaded 'R' word.

Review.

The most hated day in any lifer's year.

A chance to be lied to by a room full of strangers.

An opportunity to have your life mapped out for you by people who were only there because they were paid to be.

Like the rest of life in care, it was a joke. A bad one.

'Well, if you'd stop bending my arm up my back, you

could get started. The report's bound to take you a while. I'm sure you can't rush a good piece of fiction.'

Ronnie sighed again, bigging up the theatrics.

'Billy, it will be just like any of the other *many* restraint reports I've written about you. It will be countersigned by Pete here, to ensure it's accurate –' Mr Uni Graduate nodded wisely – 'and you are welcome to read it, like anything else in your file, if you'd like to make an appointment.'

Then, with a final twist, Ronnie released my arm and stepped away, quickly enough, I noted, to avoid any last-minute lunges.

As if I'd waste my breath.

'Can't say I'll be rushing to have a read, Ronald.' I winced, rubbing at my collarbone. 'Perhaps I'll wait till it's published, eh?'

Point made, I headed for the stairs and the safety of my room.

They reckon a bedroom is important to a kid in care. So my social worker told me anyway.

Meant to be a haven, or some such cack. Somewhere that's yours and yours alone.

Didn't seem to work much like that for me. Mine was a collage of boarded-up windows (the aftermath of Ronnie getting in my face again), stained carpets (yacking after a misadvised bottle of voddy) and a rather sad-looking mattress covered in clothes that were slowly rotting into the duvet.

I didn't even have a wardrobe. Ronnie removed that after I tried to barricade the door a while back.

No, it certainly wasn't a haven, but at least I didn't have

to share, like I heard they do in some other homes. Can you imagine? Waking every night to some snotty little git snivelling for his mummy? I'd rather be on remand.

Slamming the door behind me (just to remind him I was still here), I kicked a pile of festering clothes in front of it (the closest I had to a decent lock) and lay on my mattress, staring at the plastic stars that littered the ceiling.

They must have glowed in the dark once, probably the brainchild of some dumbass social-work scummer, but now they were just shabby and faded, serving no purpose but to give my eyes something to land on.

My arm was sore. But, to be honest, everything aches after a restraint. Not just your muscles either, your brain, your guts, everything. It's difficult to explain. You feel lopsided, out of kilter, just wrong.

I grimaced as I thought back to waking up this morning.

Even though it was the riskiest night's sleep I'd probably ever had, it was also the best I could remember.

Sleep is always fitful. Sometimes because I'm drunk, sometimes because of the twins. But there's always a reason for a broken night.

Not last night.

Last night passed in a flash.

No dreams, no rolling about.

Just eight hours of blissful kip.

I swear I woke up smiling, and that wasn't just to do with where I was.

It was because I'd slept and so I didn't have to think.

No real surprise, I suppose, that the rest of the morning had gone downhill.

Leaving Jan and Grant's had been easy. I just made the bed and let myself out the back door. Didn't want to take the mick by making myself breakfast or nothing. After all, if it had worked once, then a repeat performance wouldn't be out of the question, would it?

No, I just slipped out through the back garden, into the tenfoot at the back, and wandered home.

Maybe I should've given a bit of thought to where I'd been, or tried to sneak in through the fire escape. It wouldn't have been the first time.

I certainly should've realized that Ronnie was on an overnighter and that he'd be looking for any reason to put me on the floor.

That's the thing with him. He has to push. Has to ask the questions. Always expects you to behave like one of his own. Eight years on and he hasn't figured out it doesn't work like that.

Those aren't the rules. Parents don't knock off after a shift.

Carers do. Scummers do.

I can't.

I'm here.

Always have been. Guess I always will.