

1. The Sheriff

Edinburgh youth court was part of a drab precinct, sandwiched between a boarded-up children's library and Jobcentre Plus. Scottish law bans British media from reporting on the trial of anyone who is under sixteen at the time of their arrest, but international media faced no restrictions and the drizzled pavement was populated by correspondents from more than a dozen countries.

Lulu Chi was a petite, geeky Parisian. Her *Chi Rock* YouTube channel had over four million subscribers. She'd just turned twenty, but regularly popped up on French and US TV as an authority on fashion and rock music, and there were rumours that she'd already penned a deal to host the French version of *Rock War*.

Lulu's camera was manned by her best friend from high school. She'd arranged the shot with the graffitied library as a backdrop. She'd been recognised by a couple of girls bunking school, who'd posed for selfies, much to the irritation of

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presenters from more established media.

Lulu's voice was high, and her manner in front of camera was more like a gossipy pal than a regular TV stiff.

'So, I'm here in sunny Edinburgh,' Lulu began, folding her arms and fake shivering to show it was a joke. 'We stayed the night in this hotel that had the cutest soaps! We're not allowed inside the court, but I kinda had to be here to capture some of the excitement.

'A quick recap of the drama - in case you've been deep under the ocean in a nuclear submarine, or you've just come out of a six-month coma - Dylan Wilton! Dylan is the son of Jake Blade, legendary front man of Terraplane. But there's no way we'll see Jake here today, because he's playing Nissan Stadium in Yokohama.

'So, after Dylan's band the Pandas of Doom got voted off *Rock War*, he went on a super-duper major bender and started snorting his rock star daddy's supply of cocaine. But that supply got cut off when his daddy went on tour, so Dylan started buying on the street here in Edinburgh. He was caught snorting coke and expelled from the posh Yellowcote school. Daddy booked Dylan into drug rehab, but instead Dylan stole a bunch of stuff from his home and ran away.

'He spent a couple of weeks living in a squat with some drug dealer here in Edinburgh. Sort of like that old movie, *Trainspotting*! Then another dealer realised Dylan had money and tried to rip him off. But somehow the robbery went so wrong, and Dylan ended up stabbing the bad guy and stealing his gigantic stash of cocaine!

‘Now comes the fluffy-hearts romantic part! Dylan skipped Edinburgh and arrives at the house of another *Rock War* contestant, Summer Smith. They spent a couple of weeks together, and recorded two super-awesome demos, which I totally recommend you watch on Summer’s YouTube. But just when it seems like things are gonna get hot and jiggy between Dylan and Summer, the cops catch up with him. Smash the door down in the middle of the night and bust his ass for aggravated assault!’

Lulu took an LG smartphone out of her bomber jacket and looked at the screen. ‘This is what Summer tweeted this morning. *Gotta go to school today, but all my thoughts with @DylanWilton. Hope the sheriff cuts you a break!*

Lulu held up the chunky black smartwatch on her tiny wrist.

‘So now it’s just before eleven. Dylan pleaded guilty to all charges and hopefully he’ll be arriving here any second. Also, while I remember, you’ve gotta stay tuned to the end of today’s video because I’ll be doing amazing giveaways of a whole bunch of Aqueous T-shirts and signed DVDs of that amazing Live in New York gig!’

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Sixteen-year-old Dylan Wilton rode in the back of a BMW. Top of the line 7 Series, trimmed with open sky roof, vented seats and seat back TVs. His ink-blue suit had been tailored for a swanky party during *Rock War*, but cocaine and stress had cost him a dozen kilos and it dropped off his shoulders.

There was a lot in his head. The car belonged to the best

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lawyer in town, but neither of his parents had bothered to turn up. His mind flashed memories. Summer sitting in class. The hot blood when he'd plunged a butcher's knife into a skinny drug dealer, and the gruesome photo of the hundred-and-thirteen-stitch wound on page sixteen of his sentencing review.

Everything came back to the first snort of cocaine, ten months earlier. It was the dumbest thing Dylan had ever done, but he'd have given anything to snort a line right now and snuff out the shame and dread.

He checked his phone out of habit, and a song came into his head. The same song every time he went to court: Bob Marley's 'I Shot the Sheriff'. He wasn't expecting any messages, but he found Summer on Messenger. He typed, *I love you*, but didn't tap send.

'Looks like a fair few press,' Jen the lawyer warned, from her tan leather seat. 'No good speaking to them.'

He thought they were still a few minutes from the court and was startled as they stopped on double yellows in front of concrete steps. A homeless woman stood by a supermarket trolley filled with all her gear, baffled by the cameras and the TV folk with good teeth and coiffured hair. Dylan took a look at the unsent *I love you* as his phone went into power saving, then hated everything as Jen's legal clerk opened his door from outside.

It was about half the number who'd turned up at his first court appearance, seven weeks earlier. Cameras popped. Teen lads in school uniform made wanking gestures and

one shouted, 'Going down ya druggie.'

A microphone wearing a *Metal TV* logo brushed the side of Dylan's head as his lawyer walked round to grab a box of documents from the trunk.

'Are you expecting a custodial sentence today?' someone asked.

'Have you stopped taking cocaine?'

'Did you speak to Summer?'

'Is it true that neither of your parents will be attending the hearing?'

Dylan noticed one of his shoes was untied as he edged through the reporters.

'My client has no comment and there will be no statement after sentencing,' Jen said firmly, as she handed her clerk the box of files, pressed the plipper to lock her car and nudged Dylan towards the youth court's revolving door.

At the top of the steps Lulu Chi stepped in front of Dylan, arms spread wide. He'd never watched any of her vlogs, but his ex, Eve, had been obsessed with Lulu's posts, and he knew she'd praised the demo track that he'd recorded with Summer.

'Are you scared?' Lulu asked gently.

Dylan wondered why this weird-looking French chick had flown all the way to Edinburgh. Maybe she was just seeking publicity at his expense, but something about her question touched him and he ignored his lawyer's guiding hand and took the hug she was offering.

'I'm really scared,' Dylan mouthed, as his body shuddered.

Lulu had to go up on her toes to make the hug work. Her

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camera operator was right in his face and all the other cameras swung around to capture the tiny blogger hugging the frightened teen in his too-big suit.

‘Come on,’ Jen said impatiently, as Dylan broke loose.

‘Summer loves you!’ Lulu shouted. ‘You’ll be OK.’

Dylan smudged out a tear as he pushed the revolving door. There was threadbare carpet, metal detectors and a dozen warning notices: *Mobile phones must be switched off, No Photography, No Eating, Physical or verbal abuse of court staff WILL result in prosecution.*

He knew the routine, putting phone, keys and coins in a tray before going through the metal detector. His belt buckle set off the detector, so he got a pat down as well.

Sheriff Johnson’s room was on the third floor. Dylan and Jen shared the elevator with a burly tattooed dad, and a muscled skinhead son who looked like the scary cell mate Dylan imagined in nightmares.

The youth court seemed to get hotter the higher you went and the hallway outside Sheriff Johnson’s room combined the heat with air freshener that failed to snuff aromas from badly plumbed toilets at the far end. They were due in at eleven, but Sheriff Johnson kept Dylan in suspense until twenty past.

She was a small woman, dressed in a pleated black skirt and cream cardigan. There was none of the high ceilings and wood panelling Dylan had seen in every TV courtroom ever, just a regular office with pictures of cats on the desk and two rows of four plastic chairs. He brought up a little bit of sick as he sat in the chair nearest the desk. The only other people in

the room were a uniformed court officer and a legal clerk representing the prosecution in Dylan's case.

Dylan felt like he'd been shot as the sheriff tapped her papers on his desk. It had been seven weeks since he'd pleaded guilty and now it was a matter of minutes before he knew if he was going into custody.

'Now then, young man,' the sheriff began, as she put on the reading glasses hung around her neck. 'Are you still taking drugs?'

'No, ma'am,' Dylan said firmly.

The sheriff cracked a slight smile. 'Glad to hear it. This is quite an unusual case. It's a first offence and I note that you have an unusual, but relatively stable, family background. I see your father has offered to pay to send you to a drug rehabilitation facility if you are not put into custody.'

'If I may,' Jen the solicitor interrupted, as she pulled a document out of a file. 'My client has already been seeing an addiction counsellor, and I have this up-to-date record of urine tests to show that he's no longer using any kind of intoxicants.'

The sheriff held up a hand and firmly refused the sheet of paper. 'I'm not taking additional submissions. The sentencing decision will be made based on your previous submissions and the pre-sentencing report prepared by social services.'

'Of course,' Jen said, nodding politely. She'd known the sheriff would refuse the document, but still hoped that mentioning it might hold sway.

'But while there are many positive aspects,' the sheriff

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resumed, 'I *must* also take into consideration the seriousness of Mr Wilton's actions. The nature of the stabbing was such that Dylan is lucky not to be sitting in a higher court, facing charges of murder or manslaughter. Although Dylan pleaded guilty to all charges and claims to have acted in self-defence, self-defence doesn't explain why he subsequently stole two kilos of cocaine and tried to sell them on to a dealer in Birmingham.

'Finally, I must take into consideration the fact that Dylan was booked into a rehabilitation programme by his father immediately after his expulsion from Yellowcote boarding school. But Dylan refused this opportunity, and chose to run away. This, along with the fact that he has a girlfriend living in the Midlands, make me question how serious Dylan's commitment to stay in a drug rehabilitation programme would be.'

Dylan glowered at the sheriff. 'You think I'd run away again, after everything that happened? And Summer's the biggest reason why I do want to behave and sort my life out.'

The sheriff stiffened slightly in her seat. 'Have you finished?' she asked firmly, as Jen put a hand on Dylan's shoulder, urging him to calm down.

The sheriff resumed her speech. 'This was not an easy decision, but ultimately I do not feel that this very serious assault, along with serious drug offences, can lead to anything other than a custodial sentence.'

Dylan shuddered and clutched his stomach.

'Therefore, I am sentencing you to eight months of youth

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custody, followed by an additional twenty-four-month supervision period.'

'No,' Dylan yelled, as he shot to his feet and kicked the back of the sheriff's desk. 'It's my first offence. The guy I stabbed was a sleazy piece of—'

Before Dylan could finish the burly court official stepped across from the back of the office and put himself between Dylan and the sheriff.

'It won't end well,' he warned, as he put his chest up to Dylan's face.

Sheriff Johnson had stood up and opened a door directly behind her desk. 'Give him a few minutes to talk with his lawyer,' she said irritably. 'Then take him down to the cells for processing.'