ONCE, SHE SAVED HIS LIFE. . . NOW, HE'LL TAKE HERS.



THE DARK

THE MILLION COPY BESTSELLER

SHARON BOLTON

THE DARK

SHARON BOLTON



Prologue

A few hours after midnight, two young women sat in a car close to the edge of a cliff; one of them was dead, the other merely felt that way. The spot they'd arrived at, leaving the road to drive the final yards over rough heathland, was the highest of Britain's chalk cliffs. It was also one of the most notorious suicide spots in the world, with cautious estimates giving it responsibility for a little short of five hundred deaths since the early 1960s.

The woman whose heart was, technically, still beating, wondered if two more might be enough to make the nice, round half-millennial. She switched off the ignition, let the sounds of the engine cooling fade into the night, and opened the door to say goodbye to the world.

Held tight by her seatbelt, her companion's eyes were closed, but as air flooded into the car, her hair blew across her face, giving it, for a second, the illusion of life continuing.

A cruel trick. The woman clinging to life – for a few minutes more – closed the car door and saw, with relief, the interior slip into darkness. Driving the eighty miles from South London, with nothing but her own thoughts and the recriminations of a corpse beside her, had been harder than she'd expected. Leaving the car, she stepped towards the black void that she knew was the cliff edge.

The night was cool for September, a light breeze blowing in from the west. Coming almost directly from the Isle of Wight, it brought with it hints of the previous day's fish catch, early autumn fires, ripe fruit falling from overladen trees. Then again, she'd always had an active imagination; the smell might be nothing more than the salt stench of the beach, a hundred and sixty metres below.

It would be a grim beach. It had embraced too many broken and battered bodies, absorbed too much blood of the dying, to be anything other. It was too late now, far too late, but there had to be better, sweeter places to die.

As the young woman's eyes grew used to the darkness, she could see the silver-white line of the chalk cliffs stretching west, and the flicker of the lighthouse in the bay. The moon was a little over half full, misshapen, oddly unsatisfying in its incompleteness, but bright as a polished coin, gently illuminating the clouds. The stars were tiny, flickering, like fairy-lights about to run out of battery, the ocean endless blackness, a vast solid sheen that gleamed as though its dark light were coming from its depths. It was a silent ocean, robbed of voice; the waves neither crashing nor grumbling, let alone thundering, against rocks.

The pain of too much loss weighed the young woman down as she approached the cliff edge, expanding in her chest like rising dough, filling all the available space, so that even breathing was becoming hard. At the same time, the wind stung her eyes, forcing tears she'd been unable to shed until now. Tears were for bearable pain, for lighter sorrows; this pain couldn't possibly be released by tiny drops of water. It would burst forth when it came, exploding her skin, flesh and bones apart like shrapnel. It would get some help, of course, from the rocks below.

At least then, it would end.

When the figure emerged from the darkness, she thought her dead friend, grown impatient, had summoned the unnatural strength to walk herself to her grave. Her cry of alarm broke upon the wind.

Not her friend, a stranger, but one drawn with the same grim purpose.

'You can't stop me.' The boy was tense, quivering, like a runner on the brink of the race of his life. He, too, was feet from the edge. Were he to sprint forward, the momentum would take him over.

'OK,' she said.

He was about her age, late teens, although it was hard to tell in the meagre light. Shorter than she, he was thin at the shoulder, thicker around the waist, and he was panting, as though the walk here – there had been no other vehicles in the car park – had been hard work. Or maybe he'd been crying; his face was blotchy, streaked with mud in the half light. He must have been sitting close to the edge, half hidden among the grass, must have jumped to his feet at her approach.

'It's my choice,' he said, still poised to sprint. 'My life.'

'Fair enough.'

His clothes, damp from recent rain, smelled fresh and looked clean. They were newish, his trainers weren't cheap, and his dark hair had been well cut, not too long ago.

'You're one of them, aren't you?' He looked frantically around, as though others – her fictional co-conspirators – might be sneaking up on him. 'The people who try to stop us.'

She sighed. 'I'm not going to stop you.'

'This forum I'm in, it warned me there'd be people like you. It said to come between two and six in the morning, that I'd be least likely to come across someone then.'

His breath was ragged, his voice catching. She felt a moment of deep annoyance, that her final moments weren't to be peaceful;

that her thoughts would be dragged from her by this needy teenager who probably hadn't faced a real trouble in his short, spoiled life.

But that was unkind, and she didn't want to be unkind, not in the last minutes of her life.

'Your mate, in the car.' He was pointing back, as though she might have forgotten where it was. 'Is she phoning this in? Is she calling for, what do you call it, backup?'

The laugh, short and bitter though it was, surprised her; laughing felt like something she'd closed a final door upon. She said, 'I doubt it.'

He took a step closer to the cliff. 'Don't come near me,' he called, shrill as a startled old lady.

'Not planning to.'

She didn't want to be unkind, but this was getting tiresome, and besides, sooner or later, someone else would come along: a patrol car, the Samaritans, an insomniac do-gooder. She didn't have forever.

'It's a big clifftop. I won't get in your way if you don't get in mine.'

Stepping closer to the edge she looked down. She'd never been afraid of heights, but a wave of nausea swept over her; for a moment, it seemed that the ground beneath her feet was moving. Chalk was far from stable, its cliffs crumbled all the time. She bounced; nothing gave, and she felt a stab of disappointment. How much easier it would have been, to have the moment taken from her.

'You serious?' the boy said.

Possibly more than he. She wondered how long he'd been here, pondering his woes, kidding himself he was going to jump.

'You're not from the, what do you call it, the coastguard, or those Samaritan people?'

'I'm here to go over the edge, same as you.'

'You're lying, it's a trick, some reverse psychology bollocks. Make me think you don't care, so that I start to.'

'Is it working?'

'No!'

'Damn,' she muttered. 'I'm losing my touch.'

Silence, then, 'I'm Nick.'

He sounded, hesitant, unsure of his own name. She said, 'I didn't ask.'

'I left a note, for my mum and dad.'

'I'm sure that will make all the difference.'

A moment of just wind and, yes, now she could hear the waves below.

'Are you for real?' he said. 'You're actually going to jump?'

'Technically, I'm going to drive. Put my foot down and soar into oblivion, like Thelma and Louise over the Grand Canyon.'

'What?' he'd missed the pop culture reference.

'Doesn't matter. So long, Nick. Have a good death.'

'Wait!' He called out to her before she'd walked half the distance to the car. She turned and knew that that, in itself, should be telling her something: she could still be called back.

'It will be instant, won't it? Death, I mean. I won't know anything about it?'

Sighing, she joined him once more on the cliff edge.

'Instant deaths aren't that common,' she said. 'Decapitation will probably do it. An explosion, maybe. Otherwise, it takes time for the body to shut down. So no, it won't be instant. Quick, but not instant.'

'How quick?'

She pretended to think about it, although she'd thought of little else on the drive down here. 'Seconds, if you're lucky. Your bones will break on the rocks. Parts of your skull will go into your

brain and there'll be no coming back from that, a couple of your rib bones might go into your heart, and it'll bleed out. Your lungs might get ripped apart too, again by your own bones, making it impossible to breath.'

She saw him shudder.

'If you're not lucky, your essential organs won't be too badly damaged. You'll be stuck on the beach for hours, probably paralysed, in a shed load of pain, waiting to bleed out, or for your heart to give up. Still, what do I know? It's not like I've done this before.'

'You are one of them, them councillor types. You're trying to frighten me out of it.'

Enough. She took a half step towards him. 'Do you want a push?'

His eyes opened wide in alarm. 'What?'

'I'll push you, if you want. Say the word.'

He backed away, hands warding her off. 'Stay away from me.'

'Your call.' She needed to get to the car, to get it over with, but something held her back.

'The impact won't be the worst,' she said. 'The worst will be the moment you jump, when you're in free fall. You'll regret it then, will give anything to be back up on solid ground, even with all the pain you're going through, but it will be too late.'

'If you think that, why are you doing it?' he glanced back at the car. 'Is it some sort of suicide pact, you and that other girl?'

A fresh wave of pain. 'She's already dead. She died a few hours ago. Drug overdose.'

'Was she, what, your girlfriend?'

'No. Just the only friend I had left.'

'I'm sorry.'

He looked it too. 'Thank you.'

Seconds ticked by.

'So, why are you here?' the young woman asked.

He didn't reply.

'Girlfriend break up with you?'

'I've never had a girlfriend.' His voice was ugly with resentment. 'Girls don't date guys who look like me.'

Curious, in spite of herself, she took another look at him, really looking this time. He was short, and the weight around his girth would sit better on his shoulders and upper arms, but there was nothing a decent diet and a few months of exercise wouldn't put right. His nose was a little hooked and his eyes rather deep set, giving him a hawklike look, but his hair was a glossy dark brown and his lips full and well-shaped. His worst feature was bad acne, covering the lower part of his face, and breaking out on his cheeks and forehead, but time and the right medication would sort that out. No scars, no disfiguring birthmarks. She opened her mouth to utter some platitude about his looks and decided she couldn't be bothered.

'Would you?' he asked, reluctant to let it go.

'You hitting on me?'

'Girls who look like you aren't interested in boys like me,' he went on. 'Even the ugly girls go after the good-looking ones. Guys like me don't stand a chance.'

He wanted her to argue, to tell him he was wrong, that plenty of girls would find him attractive. Half of her wanted to, if only so he would leave her in peace, but she was so very weary. More than anything, she wanted to sleep. The problem with sleep, though, was that it always came to an end. When you slept, you woke. From the kind of sleep she had in mind there was no waking up.

'You wouldn't, would you? You wouldn't go out with me?'

'No,' she said truthfully. 'Do you want to come with us?'

'What?'

'I'm getting in the car now. I'm going to drive over the edge. I don't think you'll ever have the courage to do it by yourself, but if you get in the back seat I'll take you with us.'

She was on her way back to the car and this time, she wasn't stopping. She called over her shoulder. 'Last chance. Just don't get in our way, because I won't stop.'

'I'm coming.' He caught up as she reached the car.

'Sure?' she said.

He looked on the verge of being sick, but he nodded.

She opened the car door. 'That side,' she told him. 'I don't want you grabbing hold of me when we go over.

'Nice car,' he said, as he got in behind the front passenger seat.

'Stolen.'

She locked the doors and turned on the engine; tested the accelerator, although she already knew the car drove perfectly. Her hand was on the brake, ready to release it.

'Shit!' He'd touched the woman in the front passenger seat. 'She's really dead. This is sick. She's actually dead.'

'You thought I was lying to you?'

He was pulling at the car door, unable to deactivate the child lock in the back seats. 'I thought it was a trick, that the two of you were part of that coastguard service, that you'd drive me back down to Eastbourne.'

'Bad call.' Releasing the handbrake she held the car on the clutch. A fraction of movement in her left foot and it would shoot forward. She'd already seen that the ground ahead sloped down.

'Let me out!'

Oh, for God's sake.

He started banging on the car window, screaming. 'Help, let me out! Help!'

Well, she wasn't going to die with that racket going on. Besides, any second now, he'd realise he could wrap his hands around her throat and they'd be going nowhere.

She released the door lock. In a split second the boy was out of the car, running towards the cliff path. She watched until he vanished, until all, once more, was silent and still on the clifftop.

'Where were we?' she asked her dead companion.

The woman beside her had no answer to give.

'Ready to face the enemy?'

Still no answer; and so she sat, waiting for the pain to wash over her again, to give her the reason she needed to press one foot down and lift the other.

It didn't come.

She thought about the boy, racing back towards Eastbourne, cursing his bad luck at running into a psycho seconds before he ended everything. She'd saved a life tonight.

Damn it, it felt good.

'I wish I could have saved you,' she said to the woman beside her.

'How about I save you instead?' replied her dead friend.

And then, for no reason she could think of, she turned to the back seat, where the boy had been sitting minutes earlier. On the pale grey leather lay the bundle of documents she'd brought from the South London squat where the two of them had been living. No passports or driving licences, neither girl had ever applied for either; no birth certificates, because they'd been lost in officialdom years earlier. A card with a national insurance number, a library ticket, a student ID card. Very little to show for two teenage lives. One of which was most definitely over.

The question was: which one?

Entirely unexpectedly, from complete despair, a chance had arisen, and facing her now the possibility of a new start. A leaving

behind of the pain and the loss and the hopelessness. She would be a fool not to take it.

She had never been a fool.

Switching off the engine, she acted quickly, removing from the car any paperwork that might identify its last occupants and wiping clean the steering wheel and all the internal surfaces she could reach. Releasing her friend's seat belt, she slid her hands beneath the dead woman's body and pulled her across the middle of the car and into the driver's seat. Then she put the car into neutral and released the handbrake. For a second it didn't move, and so she gripped the edge of the open window, braced her feet against the rocky ground and pushed.

Movement.

She pushed again and the car rolled forward. With one last look at her dead friend, she ran round to the back of the vehicle where she could put more muscle into the task. She pushed hard, the bumpy ground giving her feet purchase. The car picked up speed, veered a little to the left, and found a steeper slope. It rolled on, and she no longer needed to push.

She stood back and watched as the car gathered pace, until the front tyres reached the edge. For a split second it paused, and she thought perhaps it wouldn't work, but then the front of the vehicle dipped, a scraping of metal over rock pierced the silence, and the car upended, presenting its undercarriage to the night. A second later it was gone.

It seemed to take a very long time before the crash sounded. She didn't look; she had no need to see the devastation below. Instead, she left the heathland and began the long walk back to London.

After a year or so, she applied, successfully, to join the Metropolitan Police.

Part One

1

Twelve years later, more or less to the day.

Since she'd joined the Metropolitan Police's marine unit, constable (soon-to-be-sergeant, fingers crossed) Lacey Flint had grown used to being surprised by the river. Huge and magnificent, at times both heartbreakingly beautiful and quietly terrifying, it had become a constant presence in her life. The smell of it never left her, nor did the sound. Its endless beat formed the rhythm of her life now; she lived on it, worked on it, played on it. She loved it with a passion shown to very few things in her life, and practically no people. Almost none. There was one, far away, whom she always had loved and always would, and another. *The other.*

But the Thames, though, the Thames was like home, nurturing, comforting, safe; at the same time a wild country of infinite adventures.

She knew it would never be her friend. No one with a brain took the Thames for granted, especially the stretch that flowed through London, the tidal part, the dangerous part. In little over a year with the marine unit, Lacey Flint had found dead women wrapped in shrouds and half-drowned living ones, fleeing dangers unspeakable in far-off lands. She'd found iron-age weapons, bones of prehistoric animals and messages in bottles that turned

out to be suicide notes. She'd fished out smugglers' hoards and drunken pirates celebrating stag parties. She'd even encountered a mermaid.

She felt, at times, as though she'd seen everything the river could throw at her; and so the inflatable unicorn, lying grubby and forlorn on the foreshore, didn't alarm her. It should have done, but even Lacey Flint could make the wrong call on occasions.

September: the best time of year, full of golden light and silvery mist, when the river calms for a while, as most of the troublesome tourists go home and the drinkers perch less frequently on its walls. Lacey loved September; after all she'd been born in the month. Well, sort of.

She'd left her home, a vintage sailing yacht moored permanently in Deptford Creek, a little over forty minutes ago on her way, not to work, because her shift wasn't due to start till afternoon, but to a social event. For the longest time, Lacey Flint had eschewed friends, because friends had a habit of being curious, asking questions, unearthing secrets that should never see the light of day. But she'd learned, occasionally to her cost, more often to her benefit, that no matter how well you hid yourself from life, life – pesky business that it was – had a way of tracking you down. And so now she had friends, and two of them had arranged to meet her, for a late breakfast, at a sweet little place (their words, not hers) off Tower Bridge. It wouldn't usually take forty minutes to get from Deptford Creek to Tower Bridge, even with London traffic, but Lacey Flint was travelling by river.

Of course, she was.

Her white, one-woman kayak flew across the water, even with a strong tide against her. Heading out for nearly three hours now the river was reaching peak flow, something around four knots,

taking everything without sufficient power out with it, to the estuary, and ultimately the north sea.

She kept close to the north bank, because keeping right, or starboard, was a Port of London Authority rule, and staying in the shallows kept her out of the fiercer reaches of the tidal flow. The dredgers, barges and catamarans in the central channel couldn't be relied upon to spot a lonely kayak, or to avoid it if they did see it; it really was better to keep to the edges when out on the river.

Lacey knew the river well, and since moving to Deptford Creek, she'd become exceptionally strong, kayaking most days, even swimming, although swimming in the tidal Thames was a by-law offence and, according to her boss, Superintendent David Cook, punishable by immediate dismissal if she was caught doing it again, and he meant it this time, Lacey. Going back, after breakfast, would be a doddle. The tide would be on her side and she'd zip along, using the paddle only for steerage.

Five minutes before the time she'd arranged to meet her friends, she approached St Katherine's Dock. A stone's throw upriver, Tower Bridge soared high and pretentious in its Victorian grandeur, and there seemed to be two people among the numerous pedestrians on it who were watching her.

Actually, there were three, but she only saw two.

One of the two, the taller, waved and Lacey risked missing a stroke to waddle the paddle back. The smaller, darker-haired woman kept her arms wrapped around her chest; a chest that seemed bigger, lumpier than usual.

But then Lacey's attention was dragged from her friends by something incongruous near the pier ahead. A pool inflatable sat on the narrow strip of foreshore between the river wall and the water. The kind of floating toy that children played with in swimming pools, it was white, with rainbow markings, about a

metre-and-a-half tall at its head by about the same distance long and, at the very back of her mind she heard the faintest whisper: that a pool inflatable had no business on one of the most dangerous rivers in the world.

2

Helen spotted Lacey first, naturally, because Helen had never lost her police officer's instinct to look around at all times, take stock, spot the trouble, before the trouble itself even knew it was brewing. Dana had been able to do that once.

Crossing the bridge made Dana nervous these days, because what if it started moving while she was still trying to make her way to the other side and she couldn't get off? It had never happened to her knowledge, not in over a hundred years, but still.

Helen, oblivious to the possibility of a bridge-related disaster, was looking downriver.

'The woman's nuts,' Helen said, meaning Lacey of course, in a white boat that looked as though a determined wash might overturn it.

Dana didn't argue. She'd concluded some time back that Lacey Flint was nuts. Since the night they'd met, almost exactly two years ago, when Lacey, covered in a dying woman's blood, had shown remarkable presence of mind at an especially gruesome crime scene, Dana had lost count of the number of times she'd been horrified by the younger woman's recklessness. On the other hand, she was one of the bravest people Dana knew, and her instincts verged on brilliant.

Inigo squirmed against Dana's chest and her hand went automatically to his head to soothe him. She loved carrying him in the

papoose, strapped snugly against her body; it was the closest she could get to having him safely back inside her again, where no one could touch him, or hurt him, or take him from her.

Dana hadn't told anyone, not even Helen, that she'd never really known fear until her son was born, but that now it consumed her life: fear of an unusual cry or whimper, fear of too long a stillness in the night, of a temperature, a rash, of taking her eyes off him for the split second it took for him to vanish. The only time she felt safe was when the three of them were tucked up in the bedroom, Inigo in the crib by her side of the bed, and no, he might be nearly six months old, but he wasn't ready for his own room yet. Dana's world had become full of fear and yet, in a matter of days, she'd be leaving him, for hours at a time, in the Southwark nursery they'd just visited on the south bank, so that she could return to work.

Dana Tulloch was a detective inspector with the Metropolitan Police; or at least, she had been, until she became a mother.

She felt relief flooding through her as they left the bridge and walked the short distance to their rendezvous point. The café, also a busy delicatessen, was Sicilian, and the owner, who didn't normally allow tables to be reserved, always made an exception in the case of two senior police officers. Busy packing truffle oil and dried mushrooms into a paper bag for a waiting customer, he greeted Dana and Helen with a tight-lipped smile and indicated a table by the far wall.

Back aching, Dana released Inigo from the papoose, sitting him on her lap. Her arms would remain pinned to her side for the remainder of their visit to stop him tumbling, but Ini was an active, impatient baby, who hated being still, even worse, restrained.

'Here she comes,' said Helen and Dana turned to see a slim, fair-haired young woman in sports clothes in the street outside.

It was the first time the two of them had seen Lacey since June, when she'd been co-opted, by their mutual friend, Mark Joesbury, into a tricky undercover operation in the north-west. Technically, the op had been a success, and some very dangerous men were awaiting trial. On the other hand, a young woman had died. No decent officer got over something like that easily; Mark hadn't and it was unlikely Lacey had either.

The doorbell sounded, and Lacey pulled her face into a smile that, to Dana's eyes, looked forced. She'd certainly taken some persuading to meet them this morning.

'Good lord, he's huge.' Lacey's eyes stayed on the baby as she kissed Helen and smiled at Dana. 'How was the nursery?'

'At least two degrees too warm, and they need some soft furnishings to soak up the noise,' Dana replied. 'There are big kids running around near the babies' cots and I'm not convinced the food they serve is as organic as they claim.'

'Absolutely fine,' Helen said. 'Lovely staff and very happy kids. It's the best rated in South London and he starts on Monday morning. Looking forward to it, aren't you Rug-Rat?'

Helen pulled a freakishly distorted face at Inigo, who squealed and flapped his hands in the air.

'Babies need social interaction,' Helen added. 'So do their mothers. Failing that, they need to get back to work.'

'He's so happy,' Lacey was still smiling at Inigo. 'I don't think I've heard him cry yet.'

'That's because Dana never puts him down,' Helen said. 'Ask her if you can hold him. Go on, give it a try. She'll find some excuse not to let you.'

'Of course, Lacey can hold Ini,' Dana snapped. 'But she's just kayaked from Deptford and she probably wants to get her breath back.'

Lacey took her seat.

'Feels like ages,' Helen began. 'We haven't seen you since you got back from Cumbria.'

Let it never be said that Helen didn't tackle difficult subjects head on.

'Glad to be back on the river?' Helen pressed on. 'Or has Cumbria changed your mind about staying in uniform?'

Eighteen months ago, on the brink of leaving the police for good, Lacey had requested redeployment, a move normally forced upon officers who'd fallen from favour. Lacey, on the contrary, had turned her back on a promising career in CID and returned to uniform service as part of the marine unit.

'There's a lot to be said for the quiet life.' Lacey smiled, to show she was half joking. The Thames was one of the busiest urban waterways in the world, a well-used route for both people and drug smuggling. And it had a high body count.

'Dana has something to ask you,' Helen said.

Damn it. She'd wanted to wait.

'What?' Lacey looked curious, just a tiny bit wary.

She'd planned to sound out how Lacey was feeling, maybe even put the conversation off for another day.

'You know Neil's been acting DI while I've been on maternity leave?' Dana began.

Neil Anderson was Dana's deputy in Lewisham's Major Incident Team, an officer Lacey had worked with several times.

'His promotion is likely to be confirmed in the next few weeks and he'll soon move on,' Dana continued. 'The team will be rejigged and there'll be a vacancy. I've sounded out the powers that be, and if you were interested in moving back to CID, your application would be looked on favourably.'

Lacey's eyes were clouding over. Well, she couldn't say she hadn't been warned. Helen, Mark, even Dave Cook, Lacey's boss

at the marine unit, had all told her that Lacey was fine where she was, thank you very much. Intent on protecting a young woman they all cared about, they'd argued that Lacey had been involved in too many dangerous and difficult cases, had faced more death and darkness in her fledgling career than most coppers saw their entire service.

Dana couldn't argue, but the waste of talent drove her nuts. Lacey had the makings of a great detective.

'I can think about it,' Lacey said, her eyes on the table. 'Thank you.'

Ignoring the told-you-so look on Helen's face, Dana said, 'There was one thing, though—'

The food arrived before Dana could finish. Oatmeal with berries for her, a croissant for Lacey, and an extravagant plate of poached eggs, hollandaise sauce and pancetta on ciabatta bread for Helen, who never seemed to gain an ounce, no matter what she ate. Inigo, who'd been showing an interest in real food recently, reached for his mother's bowl. Propping him on one arm, Dana tried it. Far too hot, and probably salted. She'd palm him off with a raspberry.

'Dating anyone?' Helen asked Lacey, which was another topic best avoided in Dana's mind. Lacey's *on-off, will-they-won't-they* relationship with Mark Joesbury seemed to have stalled completely.

'What about that colleague of yours, you know the one who climbs like a monkey. What do they call him? Batman?'

Mark was keeping tight-lipped about it too. That said, Mark was avoiding Dana and Helen almost as much as Lacey had been, probably trying to avoid exactly these questions.

'Spider-Man,' Lacey answered. 'AKA Finn Turner. And no, he's too much of a player for my taste.'

'Seen anything of the new boss of SCD10?'

Helen meant Mark, recently promoted on the back of the Cumbria case. Honestly, did the woman know the meaning of the word 'tact'?

Out on the foreshore, fewer than two hundred metres away, a man was blowing more air into the plastic pool inflatable.

3

'There was something you wanted to ask me,' Lacey reminded Dana, as they got up to leave.

Bill paid, baby paraphernalia gathered into Helen's backpack, Inigo safely in his papoose, the three women said their goodbyes to the café owner and stepped out onto the embankment. The day had grown brighter, clouds clearing to leave a cornflower blue sky, but a fresher breeze was coming off the water.

'We can do it some other time,' Dana replied. The others had been right, Lacey wasn't ready for a return to CID. Her refusal to talk about Cumbria, her evasive replies when questioned about Mark, her reluctance to talk about herself on any level, all led to the same conclusion: Lacey wasn't ready.

'No, you can't,' Helen argued. 'Get it over with, or this will drag on.'

Dana gave a very audible sigh. 'It's just – people really are very keen to get you back into CID, Lacey, they know what an asset you'd be, but . . .'

Damn Helen, this really wasn't the time.

'. . . there is some – I won't say concern exactly, just a bit of – well, you could call it disquiet – and the extent to which you can put minds at rest – it could smooth things over very helpfully.'

Helen breathed out loudly through her nose.

'Spit it out,' Lacey said, her face a picture of patient amusement.

'Questions are being asked about your monthly visits to Durham prison,' Dana said in a rush. 'I understand you and Victoria Llewelyn have a history, and everyone knows you were instrumental in her arrest, and there's no question that you've acted improperly at any time, the hearing made that clear. It's just . . .'

'It doesn't look good.' Lacey's face had closed down. Not meeting Dana's eyes, she pulled out her phone. 'Look, I've got to go. I'm going to miss the tide. Let's do this some other time. Good to see you both.'

And that was that. A quick kiss on both their cheeks, a lingering one on the top of Inigo's head, and Lacey had left them, striding off towards St Katherine's pier.

'Told you so,' said Helen.