

WILL SHINDLER

The Cold Case



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PROLOGUE

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The air itself felt suffocating. It was half past four in the afternoon and the summer heatwave was showing no signs of mercy. The three of them weren't rushing. No one was rushing anywhere at the moment. They were in the happy corridor between the end of another school day and an evening full of homework. Billy Rickson resented the very principle of homework. White, eighteen, with a sharp angular face, as far as he was concerned his schooldays were almost over – homework, revision and everything else that came with it was very nearly history. With the end in sight the same old routine felt like an imposition.

'It's too hot to be outside,' whined Lee Ellis. They were classmates at the same secondary school in South Croydon. With a shock of styled black hair above cobalt blue eyes and flushed pink cheeks, Lee was a favourite with the school's female population even if he was already taken.

Some way up the pavement was his girlfriend Jemma Vickers, a tall young Black teen from the same class who was striding towards the entrance of a small corner shop. She turned round and gave them both a withering glare.

'I'm not buying yours as well if that's what you're both thinking,' she shouted loudly. Lee and Billy exchanged a smile. She'd always been something of a tomboy right from their

first days at school – now she was a tomboy with almost fashion-model looks – at least that’s what Billy thought.

She possessed long dark hair, a finely chiselled face and soulful brown eyes – which right now were regarding them both with mild contempt. He loved her a little bit, which both she and her boyfriend knew. It was a crush he’d struggled with at times, but since Lee and Jemma had got together the previous year there was a general assumption that his feelings had gone away. It wasn’t true of course, but pride kept him from letting them know that. Now that university beckoned, a little bit of him was selfishly hoping that going separate ways might help split the pair up.

‘What are we getting?’ said Lee as they caught up with her.

‘Beer,’ said Jemma firmly.

‘I want cider,’ said Billy.

She rolled her eyes.

‘We’ll get both,’ said Lee and they all grinned.

A few minutes later they emerged from the shop carrying a four-pack of beer, a two-litre bottle of cider and multiple packets of crisps, which they began stuffing into their school bags. Lee wiped the sweat from his brow.

‘Do you know what – I might just go home,’ he said, suddenly tired. ‘Right now, all I want is a cold shower.’

‘No, you don’t,’ said Jemma, striding ahead without waiting for a response. She marched on while Lee waited with Billy, as he tried to find space in his sports bag for the beer.

‘I just want to get out of this heat,’ panted Lee.

‘So do I but why are you in such a rush to go home?’ said Billy as he watched Jemma turn a bend and disappear from view. Why would anyone want to rush away from *her*? he thought. ‘Come on,’ he continued. ‘It’s not like we haven’t got somewhere to go, is it? And it’ll be cool *in there*,’ he added conspiratorially.

Lee knew exactly where he meant. They'd found a disused electrical substation up in the woods near Addington Hills and had made it their own over the summer. A place where all their appetites could be indulged without prying eyes.

The boys turned the corner and stopped in sudden shock at the sight that greeted them. A white van was parked by the pavement, its back door wide open. Jemma was lying on the ground motionless while a man in a ski mask knelt next to her. Bizarrely, Billy's first thought wasn't for his friend – more how anyone could be wearing a covering like that in this heat. The man turned and rose to his feet. Before they could react, he was sprinting straight at them holding something up.

Billy heard a spray and felt a fine mist surround his face. For a fraction of a second, it was almost welcome – cooling and wet. Then there was pain and the smell of something like chilli pepper. His eyes immediately began streaming and he started to cough violently. With it came terror, the realisation that he was utterly defenceless now. He swung out a hand, but it didn't connect with anything, and he fell to his knees, furiously rubbing at his eyes.

All he could see were bright kaleidoscoping colours. He was coughing so hard he thought he might throw up. Something was happening though; he was aware of that even if he couldn't see it. He could also hear a voice now, calling out. Someone was running towards him, a young woman by the sounds of her. He heard a door slamming, and blurrily he saw the van accelerate away. He tried to speak but all that came out of his mouth was a dry croak.

Today

'Fucking hell it's cold,' said Detective Inspector Alex Finn. Dressed in full running gear, he was bent forwards, hands on

his hips, panting hard. Clapham Common was shrouded in early morning darkness, the falling snow visible under the yellow street lamps. He looked up at his companion, who was barely suppressing a smirk. ‘And don’t tell me this is *bracing* or normal for where you come from,’ he added, balefully. The tall track-suited figure looked over at him pityingly.

‘Christ on a bike, don’t coppers have to pass bleep tests or something?’ he said in a dry Glaswegian accent. Murray Saunders might just slowly have become one of Finn’s closest friends. They were of a similar age, both in their late forties, though Murray certainly looked the more battle-hardened of the two. He ran an Alcoholics Anonymous Group close to Cedar House, the station where Finn worked, and possessed an insight into human nature that the policeman had come to value. He was also someone who thoroughly enjoyed poking fun at his rather uptight façade.

‘I’m as fit as I’ve ever been, thanks – it’s just too bloody arctic for this today,’ said Finn straightening up.

‘Exercise is good for you. Good for your body, good for your brain and good for your soul,’ said Murray more seriously.

Finn knew what he meant. They’d started this tradition a few weeks before, an early morning run together before work. It was in part a response to a recent loss Finn had suffered. Detective Sergeant Jackie Ojo had died in the line of duty and her death was something Finn felt personally responsible for. She’d been more than just a member of his team; she’d been a good friend too. She’d never let rank get in the way of saying what needed to be said to him and he missed her greatly. It was the second major bereavement he’d been forced to go through in recent times. His wife Karin had died three years earlier and he’d just been emerging from that long dark shadow when he’d been hit by this latest tragedy.

It had been Murray's idea to go running together – he thought, correctly, it might help prevent Finn from retreating inside himself again in response to his loss. The two had first met when Finn's grief had been at its lowest ebb, and the counsellor had helped him find a way through, something the policeman would always be grateful for. However, here, now – in the falling snow at silly o'clock in the morning – all he wanted was a warm shower and a large breakfast. He held out his hands in surrender.

'Seriously – is this doing either of us any good?'

Murray smiled.

'It is a little on the fresh side – I'll give you that,' he said. 'Do you fancy grabbing a coffee instead?'

Finn nodded in relief.

'I thought you'd never ask.'

They turned and began trudging towards the main drag of shops on the other side of the common. The rush hour traffic was just starting to build on the South Circular and the smell of petrol fumes was drifting over.

'We haven't talked about Jackie for a while – don't think I haven't noticed,' said Murray casually.

'It's still a bit raw, mate,' said Finn.

'I get that – but I also know what you're like. What you show the world and what you're feeling aren't always the same thing are they?'

'I promise if I need to talk, then I'll be in touch . . . and then I'll try and get a word in edgeways. That's usually how it works,' said Finn. Before he could add any more his smart-watch lit up. He checked the incoming message and his expression turned serious.

'We'll have to postpone that coffee, I'm afraid. Something's come up.'

'A dead body I take it?'

Finn nodded ruefully.

‘You know the drill.’

And then his watch flashed with a second message and this time he stopped still to take in what it was telling him.

‘Oh no,’ he murmured.

A short while later, following the swiftest of showers and shaves, Finn parked up in the snow and looked at his reflection in the car mirror. A gaunt, pale face stared back at him. Carefully moisturised skin and expensive designer glasses projected a sensitive, almost scholarly look. But there were bags under his eyes that spoke of the recent lack of sleep and near-permanent fatigue he was experiencing.

He took a deep breath, snapped on some nitrile gloves and stepped out into the cold. He was parked in a back street in Tooting, out of the way of the morning rush hour. He felt his foot immediately slide on the icy pavement and slowed down – the gritters had, as usual, stuck only to the main thoroughfares. Ahead he could see the police cordon tape sealing off a road that wound into a tunnel beneath a railway bridge. He knew what he was about to see, *who* he was about to find and wrapped his coat tightly around him. It was important to park his emotions and keep things dispassionate. He used to be good at that.

The freezing wind whipped sharply around his cheeks as he flashed his warrant card at the PC manning the cordon and dipped under the tape. He walked down towards the forensic tent, which had been set up on the pavement ahead of the tunnel’s entrance. The forensics operation was only just in the process of beginning. Ahead, he could see the familiar silhouette of DC Sami Dattani talking to the forensic pathologist. Another member of his team at Cedar House, even Sami’s usual boyish demeanour seemed to have altered in the past

few months. An easy-going enthusiasm replaced by something quieter and more brooding. The DC looked around, saw Finn approaching and came over to join him.

‘Rigor mortis hasn’t set in yet, so it looks like the time of death would have been within the last six hours or so,’ he said.

Finn checked his watch. It was only just past eight in the morning.

‘Likely cause of death?’ he asked.

‘You better come and see for yourself,’ replied Dattani. Finn went over to a crate by the cordon’s entrance and helped himself to the necessary forensic apparel and slipped into it. He followed the DC over to the tent’s entrance and peered inside. A Black female who looked to be in her early thirties was lying on the ground face up. Blood had pooled around her head and there was a cut on her face. She seemed to be staring back up at them with an almost glassy disappointment.

‘Pathologist thinks there might have been a fight of some sort. There appears to be two sets of footprints in places – it could be a mugging gone wrong in these conditions. A high chance there was a struggle – she slipped and smashed her head on the pavement, though obviously, we’ll have to wait for the post-mortem to firm that up,’ said Dattani.

‘Was anything taken?’ asked Finn but Dattani shook his head.

‘The attacker might have been too freaked out when he saw her head smash open.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Uniform found her driving licence in her pocket, which they identified her with,’ added Dattani, slightly hesitantly. ‘They said that you knew this woman, guv – when they called to inform you?’

‘Yes,’ Finn replied quietly. ‘Her name was Jemma Vickers.’ He almost added something else but then stopped, his gaze not shifting from the body.

Dattani looked at him uncertainly as if waiting for more.

‘She was somebody I let down once, Sami.’ He faltered. ‘Someone *else* I let down. If the DCI asks, tell him I’ll be with Lee Ellis. He’ll know who he is and why I’ve gone to see him.’

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heels and walked back to his car.

Ten minutes later Finn pulled up in a small street in the hinterland between Croydon and South Norwood. It was mainly a strip of 1930s terraced houses with a newsagent and a pub at one end and, midway down, where Finn was parking up, a small cafe. As he shut the car door behind him, he briefly surveyed the place – it wasn’t your classic greasy spoon.

Written across the frontage in large navy-blue lettering was the word *Randelli’s*. Money had clearly been spent and although not exactly spacious it looked clean and pleasant inside. The windows were partially steamed up and he could see a handful of punters enjoying their breakfasts. As he entered, he was hit by the smell of fried bacon and good coffee, and he felt his stomach rumble. In the background, a radio was loudly blasting out Magic FM. The place looked like it had recently been redecorated, all brilliant white brickwork with framed pictures of what looked like the Inter Milan football team on the walls.

Behind the counter was a muscly, olive-skinned man in his twenties with slick black hair. He greeted Finn with a cheery smile.

‘Yes chief – what can I get you?’ he said.

Finn produced his warrant card and introduced himself.

‘I’m here to see Lee Ellis,’ he said, and the man’s face darkened. ‘It’s alright, he’s not in any trouble. Tell him it’s Alex Finn – he knows who I am.’

The man looked at Finn curiously, then turned and opened a small door that led into the cafe’s kitchen area.

‘Lee, there’s some copper here to see you. Says he knows you,’ he shouted. Finn looked around – the rest of the clientele didn’t seem bothered, and the steady chink of cutlery on china continued unabated.

After a moment, a man Finn hadn’t seen for a long while slowly emerged. He was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans covered by a chef’s apron and had a fully shaven scalp that gave him an almost skeletal appearance. Sharp cobalt blue eyes locked on to Finn straight away but there was no warmth in them. There seemed to be even more tattoos than he remembered from their last encounter. Intricate blue-green designs laced both arms and there was something that resembled a Japanese dragon around his throat. But the marking Finn remembered the most – the spiral of psychedelic colour that grew out of his neck and across one side of his face – was as startling as ever.

‘What are you doing here?’ he said tonelessly.

Finn braced himself and looked at him levelly.

‘I’m sorry, Lee – it’s about Jemma . . .’ Those laser blue eyes immediately flared at the name. ‘I’m afraid she’s dead – we found her body earlier this morning.’

Lee stood motionless as he received the news.

‘How?’ he rasped.

‘We don’t know yet. We’re still investigating the circumstances. Maybe a robbery that went wrong – there were signs of a second person there . . .’

The younger man’s breathing had become shallow, the pain starting to spread out across his face.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Finn gently.

Lee didn’t reply but slowly one hand moved as if to scratch the small of his back. When he brought it back around Finn saw a gun was being pointed at him – now it was his turn to be shocked.

‘What the fuck . . .’ said the man behind the counter, reacting first.

‘*EVERYBODY OUT – NOW!*’ screamed Lee suddenly. The rest of the cafe stopped and looked at him, not entirely sure whether this was for real or not. Lee waved the gun at them, his eyes blazing. ‘*I SAID OUT,*’ he yelled again.

Now they understood. Two workmen in orange high-vis jackets didn’t need asking a third time and ran for the door. A pensioner who’d been studying the racing tips in the paper scuttled after them. Only a well-built man in painter’s overalls didn’t seem fazed by what was happening. He rose to his feet slowly and took a step forward.

‘Don’t be a mug, mate,’ he said in a low voice.

‘Just do as he says,’ said Finn urgently, recognising a have-a-go hero the situation didn’t need. The man in overalls ignored him and kept his eyes on Lee instead.

‘You’re not going to shoot me – you ain’t got the balls. So put that thing down and don’t be a dick.’

Lee instantly fired the weapon, and the deafening sound of the shot whip-cracked around the room. For a moment the only noise was George Michael singing ‘Wake me up before you go-go’ on the radio, then the man fell to the floor and began howling in agony.

‘Marco – turn that fucking thing off,’ said Lee and his terrified colleague ran over and killed the sound. Lee turned to Finn. ‘It’s the same guy isn’t it – the one who took us before? He’s killed Jemma.’

Finn tried to find the words, still shocked at what was unfolding in front of him. ‘Lee . . .’ he began but the other man cut him off.

‘This is your fault. This is on *you*.’

He raised the gun and pointed it at Finn’s head.

I

‘Can I get you anything else?’ said the waitress with a casual smile.

Detective Sergeant Mattie Paulsen glared up at her.

‘I asked for a soya latte.’ She prodded a large mug of coffee with her finger. ‘This has dairy milk in it,’ she said as if the drink itself had just murdered someone. If the waitress was bothered, she didn’t show it.

‘So sorry – I’ll sort that out for you,’ she said pleasantly, removing the offending cup. Paulsen watched her leave with a sour glare. In her early thirties, she was tall, gangly with a shiny black bob of hair and spoke with a mild Scandinavian lilt to her accent. Though raised in London, her dad was Swedish, and her mum was Jamaican. And it was her father who was the reason she was eating in this rather expensive Islington coffee shop.

Sitting beside her was a warm-faced woman, also in her early thirties, with long blonde tresses. Nancy Deen was Paulsen’s long-suffering girlfriend. With them was Paulsen’s older brother, Jonas. A teacher in east London, he shared her dark good looks and possessed the same hint of an accent. He’d been the one who’d convened this particular pre-work breakfast meeting.

The siblings’ father, Christer Paulsen, had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s some years before.

He’d surprised them all by defying the condition relatively successfully since then, but their luck – as they knew it

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eventually would – seemed to have run out. In recent months, his condition had begun to decline sharply. The memory loss had become more pronounced, the confusion greater, and most worrying of all there'd been spells of unexpected aggression. A collective decision had been taken with their mother to finally put him into a care home. With a week to go the reality of that was now beginning to dawn on all of them.

'It's the right thing to do, Mattie,' said Jonas. 'There's no point getting cold feet now. We all agreed on it.'

'I know – I'm just starting to think that perhaps we're being a bit premature. He'll be so lonely – he'll hate it and the idea of that *really* upsets me,' said Paulsen, unable to keep the slight catch from her voice.

'Look . . . it's done now. If it doesn't work out, you can reassess things later,' said Nancy diplomatically. 'You decided this needed to happen as a family – you can always change your minds as a family if it comes to it.'

The pair nodded glumly.

'I suppose,' said Paulsen without much conviction.

'So what else is new?' said Jonas.

'We've booked a holiday,' said Nancy, glad to change the subject. 'St Lucia!'

'The Caribbean?' said Jonas unable to contain his reaction. 'How did you afford that?'

'We haven't been anywhere for ages, so we've been saving for a big one. It'll be good to get some sunshine,' said Paulsen.

Jonas sipped at his coffee as he thought about it.

'How long have you two been together now?' he said.

'Longer than you've managed with anyone,' retorted his sister and he smiled. Jonas was a famous commitment-phobe and well used to the jibe.

'I'm sure a wedding would make Mum very happy,' he said. 'Particularly now – she could use a lift.'

Paulsen gave him a filthy look.

‘Don’t make me throw something at you – not in public.’

Nancy looked across sharply at her partner, unimpressed.

‘What?’ said Paulsen innocently.

Jonas grinned and finished off his drink.

‘I think my work here is done,’ he said then checked his watch. ‘I better get going. Let’s . . .’ he threw his hands in the air impotently ‘. . . *keep talking* about Dad. I’ll give Mum a call tonight and see how she’s doing.’ He stood, grabbed his coat off the back of his chair and pulled out a pair of smart leather gloves from one of the pockets. ‘Take care of yourselves, eh? And seriously I’m glad you’re getting away. You both deserve it.’

His sister rose and hugged him, and he gave Nancy a quick wave before heading for the door. As he left, the waitress returned with the replacement cup of coffee. She laid it down in front of Paulsen and gathered up Jonas’s empty plate and cup. Paulsen pointedly waited in silence for her to leave.

‘Don’t start,’ she said before Nancy could speak.

‘Don’t be daft. I wasn’t really offended, but he has a point – maybe we should start thinking about the future and where we’re going? We haven’t had a chance to talk properly for a long time.’

Paulsen looked across at her.

‘Sorry, Nance – I know I haven’t been brilliant company recently.’

Nancy nodded sympathetically.

‘It’s understandable – after everything that happened.’

Jackie Ojo’s death had hit Paulsen particularly hard. They’d been friends, but the older officer had also been something of an unofficial mentor. As two women of colour within the Met, Ojo had helped her navigate her way through

an organisation that frequently fielded accusations of both racism and sexism. There was a debt there that could now never be repaid.

Paulsen had been exploring some options for a potential promotion to another station when the vacancy tragically opened at Cedar House. Her elevation to detective sergeant had been supported by Finn and felt like a natural progression. But several months on, the reality was that she hadn't found replacing Ojo easy.

There'd been an unspoken resentment from some of the old dinosaurs that still roamed the station – a sense that she'd stepped just a bit too quickly into a dead colleague's shoes. She hadn't quite found the right balance between curbing her own naturally spiky personality and the necessary people skills either. She was aware there was still a lot of work to do to convince the doubters that she was fit to replace their much-missed friend. Most of all she hadn't quite convinced herself yet.

Nancy knew all of this, of course, and was doing everything she could to support her. But as ever with Mattie Paulsen – others could only help as much as she let them. The holiday had been Nancy's suggestion and she'd been cheered by the level of enthusiasm with which the idea had been taken. But right now, St Lucia felt a long way off. The snow was falling again outside and there was a long line of non-moving traffic stuck on Upper Street.

'I don't want to go to work today,' said Paulsen quietly, almost surprising herself with the words. Nancy reached out a hand and wrapped it around hers. As if on cue, Paulsen's phone vibrated on the table. She looked down at the incoming message and her face fell even further.

'What is it?' asked Nancy.

Paulsen shrugged.

‘The usual. Someone, somewhere’s had a really bad morning.’

Just after nine, Paulsen arrived at Cedar House. She made her way up to the incident room and ten minutes later found herself summoned to a meeting. DCI John Skegman was a thin, wiry man in his early fifties who looked more like a fussy post office clerk than a senior police detective. Like most bosses, he wasn’t particularly popular. His demeanour, quiet and aloof from the rank and file, didn’t help. But Paulsen had found a new respect for him in the months since Ojo’s death.

It wasn’t just her murder at the hands of an organised crime gang that he’d had to contend with. Simultaneously, another officer in his team had confessed to working for the OCG who’d killed her. The two things combined had given Cedar House an unenviable reputation inside and outside of the police service. But far from being destroyed by those events, Skegman seemed to have been revitalised by them. In his own way, Paulsen felt he’d shown real leadership. He’d protected them all as best he could and, as a station, they’d battened down the hatches and got on with it. In the past, she hadn’t always felt he’d fully trusted her, but he’d backed her promotion without hesitation, and she’d appreciated that too.

As she entered his office, she unexpectedly found him chatting to an attractive young Black woman wearing a bright purple top. The visitor beamed a large smile in her direction that Paulsen didn’t return.

‘Mattie – thanks for popping up,’ said Skegman and she tried – and failed – to recall the last time she’d heard him use the phrase *‘popping up’*. ‘This is DC Vanessa Nash – she’s the new full-time replacement for ...’ he smiled awkwardly ‘... you.’

That made sense. Her position had been covered by a series of attachments over the last few months and a full-time appointment was overdue. She nodded and shook hands with the newcomer, still not feeling a great desire to return the enthusiastic smile that continued to blaze across Nash's face.

'It's honestly brilliant to be here,' gushed the young woman. 'Sorry about the top – it's probably a bit much for day one, isn't it? I was in uniform before so it's my first day in plain clothes and I haven't had time to sort my wardrobe out.'

The words came tumbling out at about ninety miles an hour with a strong London accent. While others might have found that engaging, Paulsen felt like she was talking to a schoolchild. She could also feel herself getting irritated, aware simultaneously that she was being completely unfair. Breakfast with Jonas, nice as it had been, had also been a reminder of what was happening at home with her father.

'Doesn't matter what you wear – it's what you do that's important,' she replied briskly.

Nash found yet another big smile by way of response.

'Couldn't agree more, sarge.'

Paulsen forced herself from correcting her to 'Detective Sergeant'.

'I know you'll make Vanessa feel very welcome,' said Skegman with a pointed smile of his own. Her coolish demeanor clearly hadn't been lost on him.

'So what's this job that's come in, boss?' said Paulsen, changing the subject.

He turned soberly to Nash.

'Why don't you grab a coffee and make your way down to the incident room? DS Paulsen will join you shortly and introduce you to the rest of the team.'

Nash smiled again.

‘Thank you so much, sir – both of you. I can’t wait to get cracking,’ she said, then nodded pleasantly at them both and left.

Skegman waited for the door to shut behind her.

‘Jesus, Mattie – can’t you make *some* effort? You were new here once, remember? With far less of a smile on your face as I recall.’

Paulsen shrugged.

‘Don’t know what you mean – but she seems very nice. Where’s she come from?’

‘Carberry Road. She was a PC there and I’ve only heard good things about her. A little bit green maybe, but nothing some hands-on experience won’t cure.’

Paulsen nodded, mild guilt beginning to set in – remembering how good Ojo had been with her during her first few weeks at Cedar House.

‘So where’s the DI?’ she asked.

Skegman walked back behind his desk and sat down looking troubled.

‘He’s . . .’ He paused. ‘I was about to say with the “next of kin” but that’s not quite accurate. He’s with someone closely connected to the body we found in Tooting earlier.’

Paulsen took a seat opposite Skegman.

‘What’s the story?’

Skegman picked up some papers off his desk and glanced over them.

‘The victim’s name is Jemma Vickers. Fifteen years ago, she was kidnapped with her boyfriend at the time, Lee Ellis, in South Croydon. They were both eighteen and it came just a few days after the abduction of another teenager, Oliver Littlewood, from the same area. It was way before my time, but Alex was here as a DS and worked the investigation. They managed to find and rescue Lee and Jemma, but they were too late to save Oliver.’

‘Who took them?’ asked Paulsen.

‘The perpetrator escaped arrest at the time.’ Skegman sifted through the papers again and found another document. ‘But seven years later, a man called Dennis Trant – who was serving a sentence at Belmarsh for possession of child pornography – confessed to it.’

Paulsen digested the information for a moment.

‘So do we think what happened to Vickers this morning was connected with her abduction fifteen years ago?’

Skegman shrugged.

‘At this stage, your guess is as good as mine. But Alex once told me about these kids. It affected him deeply – it was a troubled investigation, I think. I know he stayed in touch with Vickers and Ellis over the years – and that’s where he is now – with Lee Ellis.’

‘Well, you know the DI, boss. He doesn’t take much encouragement to blame himself for stuff,’ said Paulsen. There was an awkward silence as she realised what she’d said. No one at Cedar House blamed Finn for Ojo’s death but they all knew he felt a personal responsibility for it. ‘I didn’t mean it like that,’ she corrected quickly and Skegman nodded.

‘I know. And you’re right – he does.’

‘So what do you want me to do?’

‘Just be aware that this is going to be a difficult one for him – he’s got a personal stake in it. You’ve got a new officer on the team as well and that’s going to make things even trickier. Look out for her and keep an eye on your DI.’

Paulsen nodded understandingly, appreciating the trust he was putting in her. It was the sort of thing he would have asked Ojo to do once and a sign of how far their relationship had progressed.

‘Of course.’

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. A uniformed PC didn't wait to be invited in.

'Sorry to interrupt, sir, but we've got a hostage situation unfolding in South Norwood. Someone's been shot in a cafe. The guy who called it in said a police officer who matches DI Finn's description was inside when it happened.'

Skegman and Paulsen immediately exchanged a look as the words sank in.

'So much for looking out for the DI . . .' said Paulsen.