

SWEAR DOWN

RUSS LITTEN



**Tindal
Street
Press**

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Ndekwe first learns of the Stewart job while flicking through a discarded English newspaper in a Portuguese bar. A page six headline: YOUTH STABBED TO DEATH IN LONDON STREET.

It is a depressingly familiar story; eighteen-year-old Aaron Stewart died as the result of a fatal knife wound outside a row of shops on the Crown Heights estate, Hackney. Stewart is described as being known to the police, a prominent gang member with a history of drugs and violence. There is a photograph; a sullen-eyed, police-issue mug shot. He looks older than eighteen. Knifed through the heart in broad daylight, it says.

A quote from a Metropolitan Police spokesman emphasizes the need to retain an open mind regarding the circumstances surrounding the death and any possible motive at this very early stage of the investigation. A dedicated team of officers is questioning people on the estate and combing the surrounding area for clues, it says. In the meantime, residents are assured that any information made available to the police will be received in total confidence. Ndekwe can almost hear Gorman's telephone voice dispensing those carefully chosen words to some drama-hungry hack.

He reads the report out to Sonia, but she feigns disinterest. Just shrugs, spins the ice around her glass and looks beyond her husband to the white and blue boats rested up in the harbour outside. It has been a much-needed break for the pair of them; glorious weather, fantastic food, welcoming locals. Nothing to do except laze around on the beach and take evening strolls along the waterfront. It has been good to get away. But it is coming to an end.

The sardines and salads arrive. Sonia tells him to put down the newspaper.

– We’re on our holidays, Peter, she says. – You promised. Remember?

She is right. He had promised. The holiday had been a last-minute deal; two weeks in the Algarve for just under a grand. They had both agreed that it was exactly what they needed; time spent far away from the stresses of the job and the relentless grind of the city. Early nights and long lie-ins, the chirping of crickets after dark and the lapping waves beneath their window. No streets with raised voices or sirens screaming past, no staring at screens. No dwelling on recent disappointments. No drama. They had both agreed.

They pick at their food and Sonia talks about various things; the sunshine, the boats, the people at the hotel, those funky yellow wedge sandals she’s seen in a boutique window; that cosy little bistro just off the square where they could maybe have their final night’s meal and what does he think they should get her mum for a present? Ndekwe eats and smiles and nods, but her words are just a vague background noise. In his head, he is already back at work.

Detective Sergeant Ndekwe. He is still getting accustomed to his new title. And he is still getting to know all the other notable names on his new manor. The dead youth staring up from the newspaper at his elbow was certainly one of them. Ndekwe had heard of Aaron Stewart and his alleged activities on the Crown Heights estate almost as soon as he’d landed at Hackney nick. Aaron Stewart; street name Knowledge, thought to be the head of a small but tightly knit group of young men specializing in drug dealing, robbery, violence and intimidation. Ndekwe runs a mental checklist of the other prominent names in Stewart’s orbit, but he can’t come up with any clear motive to murder. Drugs, he thinks. Either drugs or a postcode dispute; some petty slight or perceived disrespect amplified beyond all reason. The usual excuses.

They land at Heathrow airport two days later and he checks his phone as they stand among slow-moving lines of luggage. The

signal is weak and he has to walk around to find a sweet spot. He gets through to Tom Halliwell at the third attempt. Halliwell tells Ndekwe that they are holding two men on suspicion of murder: a kid in his late teens off the Crown Heights and an older guy.

Sonia tells him to turn his goddamn phone off.

– C'mon, Fast Track, she says. – Fourteen days, yeah? Fourteen full days. Remember?

That's what she's started calling him since he got the promotion: Fast Track. It had been affectionate at first, a teasing term of endearment; but now it carries a definite undertone. Everything has happened quickly for them, ever since they met four years ago when her temping agency sent her for a six-week stint filing data at Lewisham police station and they'd progressed from lunch dates to evening dinner to the headlong tumble into love, a short engagement and then the wedding, followed by two house moves back and forth across the river; a new job for her, and promotion for him.

He pockets his phone and they wheel their suitcases across the car park under a bright blue cloudless sky. It is nearly as hot as the Algarve; the same relentless sun, the same clinging humidity. They drive back to their house in Woolwich and unpack. They shake the sand from their clothes and open two-week-old post. They go to bed early and rise late. At Sonia's insistence they keep their phones turned off and their dressing gowns on until at least midday. They eat takeaway food and drink cold white wine and lemonade in the back garden. On the Sunday they go to church with Sonia's parents and share souvenirs and photographs over a roast beef dinner in the afternoon. They return home and watch TV while he irons five freshly washed work shirts in preparation for the coming week. The Stewart job is mentioned on the local news round-up. Police are holding two men in connection with the murder. No further comment is offered.

They go to bed and Sonia curls herself tightly around him. She strokes his shoulders and arms and kisses his neck, timidly at first and then with an increasing intent until he puts his fingers to her

mouth and tells her he has to rest; big day tomorrow. And then he turns over, away from her, and his breathing deepens and steadies until he is asleep.

She lies behind him in the dark, the sheets balled up in her fists, the noise of the traffic outside and the ache in her chest that keeps her from sleep.

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The next morning Ndekwe is at his desk before seven, wading through the debris that has gathered in his absence; an endless column of unread emails, angry, blinking voicemail lights and a mountain of memos and paperwork, all demanding his immediate attention on the vital issues of modern police work: health and safety, diversity awareness, prejudicial behaviour and coordinated community planning. He works slowly and methodically as the station around him fills with the bustle of the incoming day shift.

After nearly two hours shining the seat of his pants, he can't stand it any longer. He rises from his desk and heads for the clamour he can hear coming from the other end of the corridor.

The incident room is buzzing, but not with the tight-lipped urgency that characterizes most murder investigations. The atmosphere here is more akin to a Saturday afternoon down the local pub; officers lolling back on chairs and sitting on desks, banter swapped over computer screens and coffee cups. Laughter and backslaps and good-natured insults. Ndekwe knows this mood: liberation. The intoxicating release of tension that comes with a result. He quietly curses his decision to take a holiday.

He weaves his way between the bodies. A few of the civilian support staff offer a quick smile of greeting, but most of the other CID barely glance his way. Ndekwe is well aware that his arrival three months ago has put a few noses out of joint. There are people on the team who have been sat waiting patiently for years for that DS job to come up and here he is, Mr Fast Track, parachuted in from

Lewisham Super Nick on the high potential development scheme. Not that he is overly concerned. Ndekwe isn't there to make friends. He is there to do a job. And this is the first big one since he landed.

Gorman is seated at the far end of the room at a desk beneath the whiteboard. He is on the phone. Detective Constable Tom Halliwell sits at an adjacent table, organizing a stack of paperwork into neat and stapled piles. Gorman raises a hand in acknowledgment as Ndekwe approaches. Halliwell glances up, nods a greeting and returns to his filing.

Aaron Stewart glares down from the centre of the whiteboard, the same mug shot that was featured in last week's newspaper. He's surrounded by a trail of red and black arrows and asterisks. The names SHEPHERDSON and McKENZIE are underlined to his left.

Ndekwe indicates the board.

- We got a result?

- Hopefully, says Halliwell.

- Two of them, yeah?

- Yeah. The boy's the collar, though.

Gorman finishes his call, puts down the phone. He leans back in his chair and links his hands across his belly like a Metropolitan Buddha, bestows a courteous nod upon Ndekwe.

- Detective Sergeant, he says. - Good time?

- Very good, sir, thanks.

- Nice place?

- Yeah, quiet ... well, bit boring, really. Glad to be back.

The detective inspector grins. - Oh we've had a right jolly-up here. Haven't we, Tom?

Halliwell grunts in the positive, head down in his paperwork.

Ndekwe looks at the names on the board. - So where did we find these two then?

Gorman heaves himself to his feet.

- Come on, he says. - I'll fill you in.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The usual bedlam down in the custody suite; a constant flow of human traffic; stony-faced solicitors, civilian processors and a queue of officers waiting to book in their handcuffed charges. A squabble of raised voices and the booming slam of distant doors. As soon as one body is processed another jostles forward to take its place; as one telephone is picked up and silenced another immediately begins to ring.

Gorman and Ndekwe push their way through the throng of bodies in the admissions office, and head down to the cells. It is cooler here, but despite the hum of the air conditioning there is the constant stink of vomit and stale bodies. A dull banging from somewhere further down, a voice raised in cracked fury:

*- I WANT MY SLISSITOR! I WANT MY FACKING SLISSITOR!
CAM TO THE DOOR, YOU FACKING CANTS!*

The two officers walk past doors of heavy blue steel. Ndekwe adjusts his pace to accommodate that of the older man.

- Shepherdson's the old guy, Gorman tells him. - They're both trying to put their hands up, but McKenzie's the collar, I reckon. Looks like he's one of Stewart's boys.

- Yeah? Where does Shepherdson fit in then?

- He was with McKenzie when he got lifted. In Hull, of all places. We brought the pair of them back yesterday.

- Hull?

- Shepherdson's from up that way, originally. Looks like he's been trying to help get the lad away.

- Why would he do that?

- Frightened, probably. My guess is McKenzie put the arm on him. Seems like the old boy owed him a few quid.

- Drugs?

- Gambling.

- Yeah?

- Yeah. Horses.

Ndekwe considers this for a beat.

– Are they known to us? he asks.

– McKenzie’s got a bit of form as a juvie: possession, riotous assembly, suspicion of handling stolen goods. Not a serious player; not in the Crown Heights crew anyway. Never heard of the old man before. Nothing on him at all.

Ndekwe nods, sets his face to a serious frown and bites his bottom lip to keep the grimace from forming. He feels slightly uneasy when Gorman throws words like ‘crew’ and ‘player’ around. He can’t be totally sure, but Ndekwe gets the distinct impression that Gorman makes a point of using these phrases when he is in the presence or earshot of black officers. On his first day at the nick Ndekwe had overheard Gorman in the staff canteen loudly informing a CO19 sergeant that it was ‘time to end this beef’ and that they should ‘get the straps out’.

Gorman stops at a door: J. H. SHEPHERDSON.

Ndekwe tilts open the suicide hatch and peers inside. A prone figure on the bed wrapped in a dark blue blanket; a shock of greasy, sandy-grey curls at one end and two grubby grey socks at the other. A laceless pair of battered shoes set carefully to face the far wall, side by side. The blanket rises and falls; a laboured wheeze that builds to a series of ragged exhalations, suddenly erupting into retching coughs.

– Ahjesusfugginchrist ...

The figure rolls over to face the wall, pulling the blanket more tightly around him.

Ndekwe shuts the hatch and looks at Gorman.

– He don’t sound too clever.

– Doctor gave him the all-clear before we questioned him. He won’t be running the marathon this year, but yeah, he’s well enough. Needs to pack the fags in, though.

Gorman gestures for them to move on. They pass another three blue doors until they reach: C. N. McKENZIE.

They stand either side of the name. Ndekwe looks at Gorman.

– Your money’s on this one, yeah?

– Yeah. His story holds together. The other guy’s a fantasy merchant.

Ndekwe tilts the hatch. The boy is sat bolt upright on the edge of the bed, upper body rocking gently back and forth, hands drumming against the tops of his thighs. Ndekwe guesses late teens, early twenties. His eyes flicker towards the door at the noise of the sliding metal, then fix themselves back steady on the wall as the body beneath them shudders.

Ndekwe tries to equate the snoring bag of rags in the room three doors away with this agitated young kid.

– What was it over? he asks.

– Money, basically. Gorman scratches the back of his head and feels wet skin. He is beginning to perspire. It is warm down here under the station, the air trapped and heavy. He plasters a few stray strands of pale ginger hair down across his forehead. – And McKenzie’s alleged that Stewart and the rest of the crew raped his sister.

Ndekwe looks sharply. – And did they?

Gorman pulls a sour-faced sneer, shakes his head in the negative.

– Halliwell and Frampton visited the family last night. The sister flatly denies it. Our guess is he’s trying to go for mitigating circumstances.

– Who’s the brief?

– Said he didn’t want one. We put the duty in with him, but he hardly said two words to her.

– And we’ve not charged him yet?

– Not yet, no. Still interviewing. We’ve got till Wednesday though.

Gorman is talking, but Ndekwe is only half listening. A muffled bell is chiming somewhere. Something about the kid’s face in profile seems vaguely familiar. He looks again through the hatch, tries to reframe the boy into some firmer context; a witness box, an interview room, a street corner, the back of a police car. But no solid connection is made. Ndekwe wills the young man in the cell to turn

his head so he can get a better look at him. He feels a sudden urge to bang on the door, to startle McKenzie into movement, force him to look fully in his direction. But McKenzie just sits there, quietly vibrating, his hands beating an endless tattoo on his knees, rocking back and forth, back and forth, staring sightlessly ahead.

Where do I know you from?

Gorman is asking Ndekwe a direct question. Something about Halliwell.

– Sorry, sir?

– I said are you OK with Halliwell?

– Oh, yeah, says Ndekwe. – Yeah, absolutely.

– Good, says Gorman. – Take him, and whoever else you need. Frampton's a safe pair of hands.

It takes Ndekwe half a second to realize the full import of these words. Gorman is putting him in charge of the case. His first job as a DS. He snaps the hatch shut on McKenzie, on the inklings of recognition, and focuses his mind back into the present.

– Yes, he says, yes, no problem.

– Good man, says Gorman. – Right, let's get you up to speed. He fishes around in his pocket, pulls out a handkerchief, wipes the back of his thick pink neck. It's too cosy for Gorman down here. He can feel damp patches forming on his shirt.

Detective Inspector Graham Gorman turns on his heel and strides away up the corridor. Ndekwe follows, quickening his pace until he falls back into step with his senior officer.

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Ndekwe goes through the case notes in Gorman's office as Halliwell inscribes a CD with permanent black marker, tongue fastened between his teeth in concentration. He pauses to examine his handiwork, frowns.

– Shepherdson, he says, is that with or without an 'H'?

– With, says Ndekwe.

Halliwell looks up, exchanges a glance with Gorman and then taps his teeth thoughtfully before making the amendment.

Bollocks, thinks Ndekwe, he wasn't asking me. He is acutely aware that he's already irked the Detective Constable by asking him to transfer the interview tapes onto CD. It had taken Halliwell almost an hour to find the necessary equipment and although he hasn't said as much, his annoyance is tangible.

Ndekwe concentrates his attention back on the notes. It doesn't take him long to soak up the bare bones. From the information on his knee he learns that both of the suspects insist they had acted alone when putting the knife into Aaron Stewart. Two different motives are offered: Shepherdson claims that he had confronted Stewart over a debt. McKenzie maintains he stabbed Stewart in revenge for an alleged sexual assault on his sister. The body of Aaron Stewart had been discovered on the pavement by a young woman taking her daughter to buy an ice cream from their local newsagent. Stewart was already dead by the time the ambulance arrived. Although there were no bullets in Aaron Stewart, there were eight marks that forensics had identified as ricocheted bullet shots; three in the pavement and five holes in the wall of the chemist's at the end of the block. Beyond that, there wasn't much to go on; no other bodies, no murder weapon, no CCTV footage; two cameras, both of them long smashed, defunct; no eyewitnesses, no firm leads or local knowledge. It seemed that the usual collective sensory deprivation had descended upon the residents of the Crown Heights estate. Nobody had seen anything. Nobody had heard anything. Nobody was there. Ndekwe is not surprised. In his experience, nobody ever is. He flicks through the notes once more.

– And the guy in the newsagent's? Mr ... Mr Akhtar?

– Nothing, said Halliwell. – He's pleading total ignorance, despite it all taking place less than ten feet away from his door. Says he heard the shots and shit himself, understandably. Hid in the back.

Ndekwe frowns, returns to the file. He reads it through again, twice.