

What Lies in the Dark

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For the K Thompsons

Chapter One

Anita Gardner is eight years old and she is afraid. She is afraid of the thing that lives under the bed. Mummy says it doesn't exist, but she knows it does. She can hear it moving in the darkness, scratching and growling, just waiting for the right moment to pounce. Anita is afraid of the big boys at school, the ones who are already ten and so much bigger than her. She has seen them picking on Mary Taylor. Anita spends her break times hiding in corners of the playground, hoping that they don't come for her. Anita is afraid of maths tests and the big girls' homework her sister brings home. Anita is afraid of dogs, and wasps, and spiders. She is afraid of the forest that she is walking through right now. She doesn't usually walk this way but the big boys are around and she needs to avoid them. Even though she now has to walk along the edge of the forest on her own, to get home.

Anita is going to cry. She can hear the sound of twigs breaking around her, strange shrieks and other animal calls closing in. A wasp buzzes past scaring her so badly she breaks into a run, her pudgy legs moving as fast as her little body can go, not quite realising what direction she is running in, just wanting to get home. Faster and faster she runs, her heart beating so loudly she can no longer hear the monsters moving.

Of course she is going to trip, no one can run in a forest when they have strayed from the path. There are always roots and branches for a foot to trip on, and when she does finally fall, she lies shaking, not realising that her leg is bleeding or that she has torn her school skirt. When she finally gets home her mother is going to be very angry but for now she is shaking and crying, just waiting for the monsters, the ogres, to leap out of the woods ready to grab her.

Nothing moves, she holds her breath, warm tears

splash down her chubby cheeks. Her heart pounds, thudding in her ears, waiting for a claw to grab her legs, hands, shoulders. For jaws to chomp down on her flesh. Slowly but heroically she will summon enough courage to stand up and limp unsteadily home. In a few years' time she will even look back on this and laugh at her childish ways, never again will she fear the woods or the dark. She will never ever know that she fell onto the grave of Victim Number Eight.

Anita Gardner knows Victim Number Eight. Anita knows her as a very nice lady called Joanna Reagan. Joanna started her teacher training at Anita's school. Anita likes the pretty lady who smiles at everything. Anita has made Miss Reagan a very nice picture and is waiting eagerly to give it to her. No one knows yet that Joanna is missing. The school presumes that Joanna has given up and gone home, they are disappointed that she didn't tell them that she was leaving but it happens all the time. Her family at home thinks she is too busy to contact them. They haven't heard from her since Easter and are starting to worry. "This isn't like her," her mother mutters. It will be a good few weeks before Joanna is reported missing, before her mother will appeal in the local newspapers for Joanna just to contact her, *no matter what has happened, please just come home*. It will be two years before people realise that there is a serial killer on the loose, and Joanna will always be missing, never found.

They call the occupant of that house, Old Man Krill or The Krill. It is a house close to a park and every day shrill voices speculate on its owner, the local bogeyman. The Krill sits by the door waiting for a child to wander into the back garden and then it's lunchtime! This would be acted out, the storyteller grabbing a foolish listener, always good for a scream or two. The adults talk about this house too, in more hushed voices and serious tones.

"Don't go near that house, Sweetie, a bad bad man lives in that house. I want you to promise never to go near that house," is the cliché on every mother's lips.

"They say Old Krill found his girlfriend with another

man and he chopped them both into little pieces and then he ate them! Not even the cops will go near that place.”

Rumours are spreading, everyone talks of Old Krill, they know so many different stories; it is a drug house, a brothel which receives no clients, an abortionist clinic for Daddy’s little secret. In tamer stories, it houses a greasy geek intent on world domination, a meth lab or sometimes a sarcastic voice talks of an old lady with nine cats.

“I dare you to ... push the doorbell on The Krill’s place.”

“I don’t want to.”

“What are you? Chicken? Cluck cluck cluck.”

“Does little Chicken want his mummy?”

Joanna Reagan’s mother is crying on television and pleading for her daughter to come home. The Christmas after Joanna disappeared is too painful to even mention. Her mother has answered the phone to what seems like a million well-wishers, pranksters and relatives. Joanna still has not come home. Joanna’s younger sister has pierced her nose, dyed her hair six different colours and had nine temper tantrums on the stairs, in small desperate attempts to make her mother notice her. None of the relatives, well-wishers or reporters ever asks about her whilst Joanna is idolised and memorialised. Even Joanna’s room, the bigger one, the one which her sister had been promised when Joanna left for university, remains a shrine to Joanna.

Joanna is just a memory. She is not recognisable as Joanna anymore, even the number 8, so painstakingly carved into her right hand has decayed away. After a year only her mother is still hopeful that she will come home.

Whilst rumours of Joanna Reagan grow cold, The Krill rumours become more sinister and creepy, the spider waiting in the dark.

Chapter Two.

It's going to be an unusually nice spring day. Fran Lizzie is lying in a near perfect spot. She is positioned in front of a fence, spread out on luscious green grass, which is lightly tickling her unblemished skin. Fran Lizzie is a pretty girl, very photogenic. She is dressed in a blue shirt with denim jeans with splashes of red. She is staring up at a beautiful clear blue sky, as birds chirp in tune with the burbling and gurgling of a river. Nature is happily beginning the day with no respect for the dead.

Fran Lizzie would have been quite comfortable, if her leg had not been trapped on the merciless iron fence, firmly wedged between the bars, giving her fallen body a slightly twisted effect. But that is nothing, a sting compared to the deep gouge that is spread across her neck, still staining the ground with drips of red. She has been alone for a while, unnoticed, no one really pays attention around here anymore. Fran Lizzie's sightless eyes cannot see the sun rise nor will she hear the first scream of the new day.

A man passes, walking his dog, at first seeing just a blur of a girl, he is not really looking, doesn't stop to think how a girl could have got over that iron fence. He doesn't want to know, doesn't want to be involved with broken rules. His dog strains at the lead, whining. He tries to pull the dog forward, anxious to go home and get ready for work. The dog is stubborn, refusing to move, as he turns to get a tighter grip on the leash and perhaps share an embarrassed look with the girl on the grass. He finally looks, a startled pause, then he loosens his grip, his arms falling limp as blood gushes toward his heart. He catches a better view of the mutilated lady lying in the lake of red.

"What the fuck..." he whispers.

The police arrive, closely followed by an unnecessary ambulance. Their first task is to get over the iron fence, a

fence designed to keep people out, a fence that had been resurrected to stop anyone from playing in the dirty river. The key to the iron gate cannot be located, so the first responders have no choice but to climb over the fence, trying so hard not to contaminate the crime scene, careful not to step into the red pond. But hoping, despite everything, for a sign of life.

She is photographed from every angle, hundreds of digital photographs documenting her final violation. Particular attention is paid to the crude cuts in her hand. Then Jane Doe is officially pronounced dead and cautiously removed. The crime scene investigators start the long meticulous task of clearing the scene. Sealing nine shrivelled condoms, twelve cigarettes butts and six crushed beer cans carefully into paper bags to be sent to the back-locked lab. They spend hours sweating into their plastic protective suits as the small crowd of onlookers grows. Working patiently, ignoring the cat calls and photographs of the media, as the stench of the algae river wafts by, while flies nosedive around their heads. The area has never looked cleaner when they finish, if you ignore the pool of the congealed blood, soon to be washed away.

Word is spreading while they work, that a body ... no, two bodies! Have been found, mutilated! Their eyes missing! High schools are filling with hushed whispers, they have found a young woman, no, man! Suspicions and worries are cast on every absent student, small children are in tears, provoked by cruel lies, ringing home frantically just to check ... mobiles ring and ring and ring.

Someone has even tried phoning Fran Lizzie, who cannot answer her phone right now. Even though she is late for work, two hours and ten minutes late and her boss is counting. Fran Lizzie's phone briefly rang, until the last of Fran Lizzie's battery died, buried behind the dissolving mints in Fran Lizzie's sinking purse. The purse is submerged in the contaminated river water, caught on a rusty shopping trolley, downstream from where the officers are dragging. He threw it in the river just for fun, after taking a trophy. He will laugh

to himself later as he sits, listening to people complain about what the hell they might have caught at the riverbank.

Detective Sergeant Aaron Fletcher and his senior partner, Bullface, have been assigned to this case. Victoria Bullrush, Victoria never Vicky 'Don't Call Me Bullface' Bullrush. Bullface is the kind of cop who could never work under cover. Everything about her just squeals cop, her stance, her clothing and her attitude. Everything down to the permanently embedded frown. In her twenty years of service she has played by every rule and will tolerate no breaking or bending of the law. Even her husband will carefully obey speed limits when she is in the car.

Fletcher and Bullface are in front of the open cast iron fence, gazing down on the cleared grass.

“She was killed here, facing the fence. Most of the spatter is on the grass. Then she was thrown over the fence, as yet no ID. I have a team dragging the river at the moment, Michaels is going through *Missings* ... body has no defensive wounds, no sign of sexual assault as yet.”

Bullface looks down at the splattered drops of blood. She, Jane Doe, was facing the river, he was behind her, probably pointing to something across the river, *Look what's that?* There would be minimal blood splatter on him, mostly likely on his sleeve, staining as he drew the knife across her throat. Possibly they might find his clothing fibres on the back of Jane Doe's clothes... possibly. It is something to start with. She gazes down on the impression Jane Doe had left on the grass, Jane Doe had been killed and then discarded with little regard. It was dubious that this had been a personal kill. Bullface surveys the once quiet street, only a few reporters remain now, photographing whatever looks shocking, still held at bay by scintillating yellow police tape. Jane Doe's death will not make global or even national news just yet. The images of the empty street, of the iron fence and its enclosed darkness, contrasting against the sharp yellow tape will just make local news. The images will be slapped on to the third page of tomorrow's newspaper alongside a small

head shot of what used to be Fran Lizzie Taylor.

There are no houses nearby, this street is just an isolated short cut home for many anonymous people. Fletcher, in a mad moment of twisted philosophy, wonders. If a girl screams in the middle of the street and no one is around to hear it, how do we know she screamed? The bubble is beginning to boil in the pit of his stomach, the dark dried stain amalgamated in his head.

Bullface is thinking more professionally. Fran Lizzie was probably very light, like a doll, says an unwanted thought. Skimpy thing, lack of defensive wounds means that she probably didn't put up much of a fight, might not even have known what was happening. An easy kill in other words. The bastard must have been very strong, strong enough to lift her over a five foot fence. Tall, dark, strong and handsome, all the traits of a bastard. It could have been two bastards though, that would have made the throwing easier, but lack of sexual assault, lack of defensive, the way Fran Lizzie's foot had been caught on the fence, suggesting he hadn't quite made the toss. These things all said that there was just one. The unwanted questions begin to pile in her mind. Did he choose a girl he knew he could lift? This site felt too planned to be accidental. He must know this area well, must have planned this ... had he planned it to be her? Did she mean something to him? The way she had been discarded suggested not, but there was still a possibility. Why leave her here? She was found so easily, like he was challenging them, look at me, look at me, you can't catch me... an unwelcome shiver runs down Bullface's spine. A planned dumpsite, a planned open kill, a kill that seems too planned to be a first kill. A rational killer who knows what he is doing. Then there were also the crude cuts to consider. The killer must have been very confident to take the time to make those, confident no one would disturb and then there was what he had carved ... her thoughts are interrupted by two triumphant shouts, echoing across the muddy water, one part of the team eagerly pulls out a brief case, the other part of the team, a women's purse, both stolen, both oozing grunge, neither actually belonging to Fran Lizzie.

Today's thirtieth caller will discover that their flatmate is dead. It is one in a sea of calls echoing that a girlfriend, a boyfriend, a sister, a brother, cannot be found and wasn't answering their phone. One of many echoes stating that my neighbour, friend, lover did not come home last night. As news of a body spreads, people begin to notice that someone is missing, someone isn't there. The survivors are jamming the phone lines, trying to reach out with a desperate plea, please don't be them... *If I tell you what s/he looks like, then please tell me it's not them, please...* It is her, Fran Lizzie Taylor, lying in the morgue with the number 22 cut into her left hand.

Fran Lizzie had been an ordinary twenty-two year old woman, living in a shared apartment. Monday to Friday, she worked as a sales assistant. Friday nights she went a little wild, to break up the monotony of the week. On Saturdays she would sleep till noon, only sometimes alone and then spend the rest of the day either shopping or visiting spas. On Sundays she would do all the little stupid jobs like the ironing or the washing and relax. She was planning her summer holiday in detail, fantasising about the sun, sand and sangria. Holiday brochures were everywhere in her flat, along with boxes of unworn shoes and coloured scarves. Fran Lizzie liked her life, liked her new boyfriend Steve, who might just be the one. Fran Lizzie liked it all, even her flat felt smiley and happy.

Bullface and Fletcher are now standing in the mess that was Fran Lizzie's living room, with the intention of interviewing her sobbing flat-mate. Fletcher, who specialises in interviewing techniques, prides himself on being able to talk to anyone, even the scummiest of scum. But he always feels a little helpless when faced with a sobbing young woman, this woman is no exception.

"She ... she ... waaaaaaah ... she..." More mascara trickles down her stained cheeks.

“Take a deep breath,” Fletcher advises as compassionately as he can. They have been trying for ten minutes now to find out where Fran Lizzie had gone last night and his patience is wearing a little thin.

“She ... she ... arrgggh.”

Fletcher patiently passes her a fresh tissue, while Bullface, who has little patience, continues her visual inspection of the living room, scanning the vast pile of scattered DVDs, looking for a sign that Fran or her flatmate were not as girly as they appeared. All she can see are chick-flicks, chick-flicks and more chick-flicks. Smiling happy actors stare out of abandoned DVD cases, mocking Bullface’s thoughts. Even the walls of the living room are painted a soothing light pink. There seems little possibility that Fran or her flatmate are moonlighting as dominatrix or anything even remotely dark. The room contains no explanation of why Fran had been picked to die.

“She ... waaas going to ... mughgo hgggr bddoosfid.” The flatmate tries again, choking in the folds of her nineteenth fresh tissue.

“I am sorry, what was that?”

“Meet ... hsfjji frhg.”

“She was going to meet who?” Fletcher is met with a fresh wail of tears. This is going to take a while, a long while. His colleagues are not having much more luck either. Extra volunteer staff have been brought in to deal with the barrage of phone calls, as exaggerated rumours are still spreading. Officers have been sent around nearby streets to interview potential eyewitnesses. No one saw or heard anything strange last night. Well that’s not true, several screams had been heard, it was a typical drunk Friday night. Fran Lizzie had been found thirty minutes away from a very popular pub. She had been last seen leaving that pub, after meeting one of her workmates for a drink. Her flatmate was supposed to go with her, but after a bad argument with her boyfriend, she decided to stay at home, something she would regret for the rest of her life. Something Fran Lizzie regretted for the last few moments of her life.

No one had seen anything out of the ordinary, Fran

Lizzie had three vodka and cranberry juices before leaving. Her workmate would say later that she was happy, laughing over the rudest customer of that day, talking eagerly of her planned holiday to Ibiza. She had left the pub alone. The workmate had been busy chatting up a crush. No one had noticed anything suspicious or anyone following her.

The last day of Fran Lizzie's life had just been like any other day.

Bullface and Fletcher left the flatmate sobbing and returned to the office to spend the last two hours of their shift writing up statements and reports, conferring with their colleagues over the total lack of evidence. Bullface and Fletcher had been assigned to this case, two other Detective Constables to a rape. Tomorrow will bring more interviews, more reports and the single fading hope that this is a one off.

Why 22? What significance did it have? They briefly consider the possibilities. Fran Lizzie was 22 and, ironically, 22 days. There was a possibility that her killer knew that. But then, Fletcher decides, her killer probably didn't know her, nothing about this murder has suggested it is a personal hate kill. Bullface would back him up here, the way Fran Lizzie was so carelessly thrown over a fence, as if she meant nothing to the assailant. It was too cold, too calculating to be the work of someone who had known her.

It could be a secret connection that only time would reveal. It could be the start of a code, although Bullface thought this was a stupid suggestion. The marks had been inflicted post-mortem so it was extremely unlikely Fran Lizzie had inflicted them herself for whatever bizarre reason. Bullface used to encounter a street crazy who carved words into himself, etching random names, a shopping list and an illegible list. Come to think of it, Bullface hadn't seen him around lately. She had never asked him why, it seemed to her an idiot question to ask, if you take the time to permanently carve something into skin, then it must mean something, even if no one else understood the meaning. The number on Fran Lizzie has to mean something. Both of them just hope,

pray, mentally plead that this does not mean that she is victim number 22. That there are 21 others out there, somewhere, screaming silently in the dark and dirt.

The pubs are quiet tonight, unusually quiet for a Saturday night. Not many women want to risk going out tonight, especially not alone. Next week the pubs will be filled again, but not tonight. Tonight people seem to be mourning a girl they have never met. Perhaps people are paranoid, thinking that he might strike again tonight. Every smooth-tongued man could be him, every drink could be spiked. Tonight, he could be there, out to get another unsuspecting victim. Everywhere the atmosphere is tense, though ironically, the pubs are the safest place to be.

The conversations are all about him. Hushed whispers as every stranger, every loner is carefully scrutinised. Inevitably, "Maybe it was The Krill," is one joke made by several different groups, a joke always met with nervous laughter, no one wanting to acknowledge the dark truth lying behind the joke. It could be the Krill. Here tonight, and tomorrow night, even for the rest of the year, people are thinking, jumping to conclusions and that is always dangerous. It isn't the first murder that this city has seen, not even the first this year, but the fact that it is a young girl, killed with no obvious motive. The fact that the news has covered it so mysteriously: confirming the mutilation but not giving any juicy details has sent the city into motion. Several super-sleuths are already blaming her boyfriend, romanticising the idea of a torrid affair, maybe with her boss, which had been fatally discovered. Not knowing that Fran Lizzie's boss is actually a happily married 60-year-old woman.

Stella is still working tonight, even though she has heard about the murder, she doesn't really care. Stella isn't going to lose forty, sixty quid over some girl. Stupid bint probably deserved it anyway. Stella hoists her short neon skirt even

higher, revealing even more tantalising thigh. The lack of girls out tonight will probably work to her benefit anyway.

The sword squelches through the green flesh, pixels of blood washing across the screen before dramatically fading as the orc falls to the ground. Another one bites the dust. Kain, even after two hundred orcs is still thirsty for more, craving that teeny rush of power derived from a kill. The power Kain so rarely feels in real life, the secret thrill of just being better than everyone else at something drives Kain to continue. It isn't as if there was anything better to do now, just yet.

Slice, slash, and squelch. Next!

Kain inhales another lungful of smoke, heightening the heady rush of orc demise, maybe next it should be a dragon demise. Every so often just checking, making sure there is no chance. No, but you have to be sure, just have to check ... no definitely not, safe for now...

Fran Lizzie's flatmate has finally stopped wailing. She is staring blankly at Fran Lizzie's bedroom door, just waiting for Fran Lizzie to get up. Fran's jacket is still draped across the kitchen chair. Her dirty dishes from last night's dinner still lie in the sink, three messages from Steve are bleeping on the answer machine. The whole flat seems to be waiting for Fran to come home. To step through that door, because everything is just fine and everything is OK and Fran will be here, any minute now, any minute now ... now ... now. Fran Lizzie's flatmate just doesn't know what else to do, so she is sitting here, waiting ... waiting. Tomorrow Fran Lizzie's mother will be here, just to check, and there will be more tears and her flatmate will finally realise. But for now she is just waiting and waiting, staring numbly at the closed door.

Brandi is listening to her mother bragging on and on about the nice young man her sister is seeing, a bright young man who just happens to earn lots of money doing some computer

nonsense. Her mother will never understand the internet industry, always arguing that it is for people who have too much time on their hands ... but those who are making their fortunes from such an industry, *Well hello Mister and do have some tea.*

Brandi can't stand listening to her mother's insistence: "You could also find such a man if you tried, maybe if you straightened your hair and wore that dress I got you for Christmas." The offending unworn dress that Brandi had decided made her look like a thirty-something, has-been hooker.

Brandi sometimes wondered what her mother actually wanted from her. Why torture her every week with, "*You could be like your sister if only you would...*" What exactly did her mother want? Brandi had a goodish job, she didn't want for anything (well maybe those boots she had seen, so sexily centred in the shop's window.) But that just wasn't good enough for Brandi's mother, oh no. She had to be sleeping with the next nerdy millionaire and buying diamonds like candy. The resentment is enough to make Brandi want to drink until sunrise because Brandi knows, her mother knows, her sister also knows that Brandi will never be good enough, she will never date the right man, or wear the right clothes, never do anything quite right. The next door neighbour and the milkman also probably know this. So why does her mother do this to her? Why continue to torture her every week with nagging whines?

Brandi decides it is simply because her mother is Satan reincarnated.

Fletcher is cooking, it is what he does, particularly when he is stressed or worried. He doesn't do decorating or cars, the sad kitchen will attest to that. He is standing in a kitchen that is desperately in need of a paint job, the grease-stained walls need to be re-tiled and while we are on the subject, his car needs a wash and a vacuum, and Mrs Claire Fletcher would be very happy if Fletcher would just clean out the empty crisp packets.

Tonight Fletcher is in the mood for chilli.

The chilli recipe his mother had written down was neat and precise. She has even added little explanations to each ingredient, explaining why the cumin/chilli/paprika need to be added, to flavour the meat and dull the harshness of the red chilli powder. After careful deliberation Fletcher decides that Chinese five spice and mixed herbs are just as good. He pokes around the overflowing cupboard for kidney beans, Claire had promised to buy some and they are in there, behind the tins of mixed vegetables. But Fletcher cannot see them. Giving up, he decides that baked beans are just as good and throws those in instead. Stirring the concoction briefly, he thinks the chilli is looking pretty damn fine, get a whiff of that lads! His stomach is rumbling in anticipation.

Fletcher then chops the peppers, concentrating every brain cell on not cutting his fingers, just focusing on slicing through the thick green flesh of the pepper, forgetting, again to remove the pepper seeds. Trying to think only of the food and not the female, chop, now lying, chop chop, dead on the cold glass chopping board, chop chop chop, every violated piece being probed, chop chop, by the doctor's scalpel. Examined then thrown to boil. Chop chop, trying to focus on chopping the wretched peppers and not those tiresome questions, chop chop, why no defence wounds? Chop chop chop! Why didn't she struggle? chop! Chop! Why 22? Chop! Why aren't there any kidney beans? Claire had promised, chop chop chop! She had promised to come straight home! Chop! Cho- the peppers have been slaughtered, the burning pan is making protesting fizzles but Fletcher is no longer hungry.