

What Lies in the Dark

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Hookline Books

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?"

"Meeet ... 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.

Chapter Three

Four months have passed, Fran Lizzie Taylor and her secrets have been buried, and her tombstone is still covered with flowers. Her smiling photo has haunted the city's television screens for long enough. People have calmed down, there doesn't appear to be any more danger. Fran has gone now, even Fran Lizzie's part of the flat has been emptied by one of her brothers, with most of her possessions going to charity. The magazines advertising fun in the sun were recycled and the holiday to Ibiza completely forgotten. Despite this, Fran Lizzie's flatmate is still waiting for Fran to come home.

No one has been charged for Fran Lizzie's murder yet. Although Fran Lizzie's boyfriend Steve was investigated and even his mother will still regard him with suspicion for a while, Bullface, to her disappointment, has proved him to be innocent. Not that Steve cares, he has lost the one person he was living for, for now anyway. Fletcher and Bullface still wait for the DNA results to be returned. Hoping, despite eyewitness testimony, that something will match Steve, just so this would be an easy open and shut case. An attempt to baffle them away from a personal kill but they know the truth, that Steve is innocent, Fran's family and flatmate who all have been DNA tested will also be innocent. Bullface is convinced that her killer did not know her. Maybe something will be on her clothes or the cigarettes or the briefcase, a little speck of his DNA. The random objects might not be random, there is always a chance. Maybe, but the chances are low. They have got nowhere with the carved number. While Fletcher thinks it might be a code or something along those lines, Bullface believes it means Fran Lizzie is the twenty-second victim and that they should be looking for others. It just sounds so unlikely, how could there be others? So many others, surely someone would have noticed something ... she wants to start searching but she doesn't know where to start. Bullface has realised that she is just waiting for the next murder, knowing there will be another one, while Fletcher remains a little more optimistic. To him, this could still be a one-off well-disguised murder of passion. They are also investigating several other cases, which are looking a little more promising. That is not a comfort to Fran Lizzie's mother, Jennifer Taylor, who still phones every week, wanting to hear of progress, always hanging

up angry and disappointed.

Marie Eine is unremarkable. Marie is a little like Joanna Reagan, patient, still ... skeletonised. Marie does not have a family wondering where she is, no one really noticed when she disappeared. No one has noticed her in all the years she has been lying here. Marie has been covered in leaves, eaten by bugs, pulled apart and scattered by animals, but she is still waiting for someone to realise that she is here. She has been waiting even longer than Joanna.

This morning, with great excitement, a child will pick up her skull and proudly show it to horrified parents. Police will be called, another investigation will start. Unfortunately Marie Eine won't be identified to the rest of the world, she is Jane Doe 217. Most of her bones will forever remain unclaimed. Some little bone fragments will still remain here, waiting, in this part of the forest. One or two of her teeth have been trodden further into the dirt by unsuspecting police officers. They will search as much and as well as they can, but the forest will keep part of her body hidden and safe.

Marie, in another life, had been a prostitute, not a very good one. She had lasted three months before picking the wrong guy, and then she lasted two scream-filled days. He would admit later, to himself, that with her he had been too sloppy, too eager. Perhaps if she had just been found earlier, then there would have been enough evidence on her to ... well it is too late for that now.

A forensic anthropologist will state that the skeleton is most likely to be female, aged between seventeen and twenty-five, he bases this on the fusion of epiphyses in the humerus. The anthropologist determines that the victim has been in the ground for anything between two and five years. Cause of death: undetermined, foul play suspected. She had been dumped naked, they are sure of that much. No fragments or shreds of clothing could be found close by, nothing that could be used to identify Jane Doe number 217. No purse, no jewellery, no shoes, no skin. Trauma to the bone was detailed, several chew marks caused by animals. Then several marks across the two of the metacarpal bones, bones that had previously formed the left hand, notches on the bones that had not been caused by a fang.

In desperation, they will hire a facial reconstruction expert, who, to her credit, will do a good job. The first time he saw the facial sketch, blaring across

the screen in an appeal for information, he was shocked. He wasn't expecting her to be found, didn't expect any of his early ones to be found. The second time he saw the picture ... the second time, well, he masturbated. He, like a million other viewers were accosted with the image of not-quite-Marie Eine, staring at them with vacant reconstructed eyes and a pronounced jaw. He and five other clients recognised her but none of them ever cared to admit it.

He is busy now, too busy to care that much about Marie Eine. At the moment he is busy jogging, he goes jogging most nights. Surveying new areas, measuring the pros and cons of the next possible dump site, planning and playing out every possible element in his head. There is another girl, a slender dark-haired girl. Who smiles at him, in that accidental moment when opposing joggers' eyes meet. He can smell the sweet scent of her hair as she passes. He can almost sense her desperation too, the silent prayer, *oh god, please let him notice me*. He can see that her looks, her pleasing but not beautiful looks, are starting to blemish. That her jogging routine was only taken up recently in a futile battle against her growing bulges. She wasn't special enough for him to waste too much time on, but she would be fun to play with for a little while. He had some big plans but they would take a little while longer to play out. He needed this now! It has been two long agonising months since his last quick fix.

Maybe for this one, he will suggest a picnic. A romantic little lunch in a secluded area, she might say yes to this, she gives off the impression she is married. The ring on the finger is a dead give-away but that smile suggests she is willing to play. Particularly if he asks the right way, really playing up the bashful yet handsome side, trick the silly bitch into saying yes. She wouldn't say no anyway, not to him, bitch is practically begging for it. They were all begging for it. There she is now, right on time, quick check to make sure they are really alone and then slow down a little.

Smile that shy boy smile and say, "Hi there."

Stella hoists her short red skirt higher, revealing even more tantalising thigh. Worked all day, whored all night! The white powder is calling to her and well, fuck it, she has earned it now hasn't she? Last fucking bugger tipped her well, hurriedly shoving the cash towards her before retreating, ashamed, back to his fucking family. Maybe

one more, she's got to eat tonight. She stubs her cigarette out on a *Missing* poster, mashing the hot residue straight into the photograph, burning away Adelina Sasha's features.

She poses against a wall, a wall coated with sperm and urine. Her scuffed red leather boots twisting as she slides down the slime. Her short red skirt rising higher and higher, revealing more bruised and needle poked thighs. Deflated withered breasts being slowly coated with warm blood.

She is still warm when they find her. They snap shots with camera phones before walking on with a laugh. But someone eventually will call the police. The call goes out, the rats gather round. A dead prostitute surrounded by shrunken condoms, approximately twenty this time, more trash and probably a rat carcass or two. More bagging and processing to do, each bag to be sealed with biohazard tape. Each item marked, recorded and photographed before being removed. The entire scene has to be preserved, even the slime, the filth and the sperm. The officers work quietly and solemnly, despite the hazards. Despite everything, despite the hundreds of photographs, despite the many pairs of eyes searching, combing through, they miss a small tarnished object, under-trodden into the mud.

Fletcher and Bullface are on their way, despite their already full case load. Six months ago they were called to the scene of Fran Lizzie Taylor, a girl who grotesquely died with the number 22 carved in her hand. Now they have been called to the scene of Stella McQam, a contrived prostitute with a 28 hurriedly carved into her right hand.

"Victim's name is Stella McQam, got an ID off her prints. She has been busted twice for prostitution."

"There is a possibility we are looking at a copycat killer. Fran Lizzie's number was carved on her left hand and her throat was cut. Stella's number was carved into her right hand and she was stabbed, just a few inches above the heart."

"I didn't think the number on the previous Vic had made the news."

"It didn't." If it was a copycat, then someone was betraying them.

"So where do you want to start?"

Fletcher doesn't feel like starting, he feels like going back home. Not that he would admit this to anyone but he just wants to crawl away, hide under his duvet. Fran

Lizzie had not been a lone death and now there were other issues he dared not voice. He feels disturbed, disturbed by the crowd who have gathered close by, held back by officers and tape. He catches glimpses of their conversations, their disdain for a bint, who probably deserved it. He feels disturbed by the noise of the traffic going past, as if this was just another day. His eyes are firmly stuck to the blood stain. His nose is even insisting it can still smell the coppery scent of blood, bile rises in his throat. He can hear Bullface giving orders, dispatching officers to seize camera phones, obtain warrants for any CCTV footage within a mile of the accident. The assailant was likely to be on foot, Stella's blood anointing his clothes. He can hear all this but all he can think is that he wants to go home.

Fletcher doesn't go home. He spends the day interviewing potential eyewitnesses who have seen nothing, but are still eager to talk. Eyewitnesses who in turn are trying to discover more details from him. They are trying to find out everything he knows. "Was she, like, mutilated?" "Yeh, I heard 'bout her. Bloke kicked the shit outta her right?" Questions like that are asked to encourage Fletcher to reply, correcting their guesses, in a superior I know more than you sort of way. Fletcher isn't that stupid but knows that replies like, "*I am not prepared to discuss that with you,*" are magically turned into "*Yes, that's what happened.*" Denials are always taken as encouragements. Questions like, "Have you noticed anyone behaving suspiciously lately?" are always met with a flurry of answers, *this is the bad part of the city, almost every customer is suspicious*. Some customers were suspicious just because they acted polite or because they didn't smoke. Fletcher had several pages of notes and reluctantly handed over video footage of the suspicious people, people he suspects are probably just eccentric rather than suspicious. Other interviewing teams will bring in similar characters; each one has to be checked thoroughly. Bullface has been shadowing him on these interviews and is equally depressed. They both sit, watching the video feed that caught Stella's last smoke before disappearing down the dark alleyway. Over and over on a loop, she goes in and dies. The assailant had entered and left via another alleyway, into the maze of a city, avoiding the cameras. Their shift is nearly over but overtime is beckoning.

"He could be anyone. Stella was known to take on any..." Fletcher pauses while deciding on the best way to phrase this, "...client. No one saw anyone wearing blood-

stained clothes, he could have dumped them.”

“I had a team collect all the bins within the mile radius. They are going through the contents at the moment. I am going over to supervise.”

Fletcher is hit by a tidal wave of stench as he follows Bullface into the room. The fumes of sickly sweet cans of fizzy drinks are battling against decomposing foods with just a few hints of cigarettes. One of the older officers looks up and grimly welcomes them to hell. They had collected twelve overflowing bags and two officers are still on the scene, going through a rotting skip. Afterwards, those two officers will be met with sprays of air fresheners wherever they go. Each bag’s location and time of collection has been recorded and the unlucky officers pull evidence out of the Pandora’s Box of rubbish, while others record the contents. So far one bloody tissue has been recovered, four bloody needles and two suspiciously smelling packages. The officers’ jokes are best left unsaid, particularly the one about Constable Tichan’s mother.

Kain has just lit the fifth cigarette of the day. That’s how times passes, cigarettes and orc deaths. Kain hasn’t even moved for four hours, keeping eyes firmly fixed on the door. Waiting and watching.

The teenager just feels like walking, he has been walking for days now. Sure he feels a little thirsty, but there is bound to be water somewhere. Sure he feels a little hungry but it just doesn’t matter. He is outside! Outside where he belongs, out in the fields, in the woods and he can walk forever! Elation fills his every vein as he runs, hollering through an empty field. Laughing and shouting at the sky. It is only out here that he feels free; he thinks he should just quit, quit living with his mother, quit begging for work and just live out here. The Earth will take care of him. It will be all right, it will be. His eyes stray across the field, attracted to the dark mass that lies there. The Earth has decided to give him the girl of his dreams. He lets out a big cry of happiness and begins to run toward her. Here is another person, a girl, someone else who also likes being outside. Someone who feels the same way!

From a distance she looks pretty, just lying in the sun. He runs closer, intrigued, until he realises she isn’t moving. He can hear a peculiar sound, a sound which comes from thousands of maggots feasting as one, a mushy pit of rice munching swiftly at her face, arms and stomach. He stares frozen at the carnage. He wants to kick

off every last one of those maggots but dares not touch, dares not move. Her mouth is frozen open in a death scream, choked back by squirming white grubs.

He had found his dream girl three days after she had died. He will be with the police soon, still shaking. His mouth permanently fixed in a choke. He will cry all through the interviews, cry as they take his prints. Then it will really hit, and he will start screaming. Crying and screaming for days as he is signed in "for observation". He will still be crying four months later.

Just hours after the body was abandoned, the insects multiply, encouraged by the beautiful warm day. Attracted by the aroma of blood they lay eggs into unprotesting festering wounds. These eggs take a day to hatch, then release squiggles of white flesh which start their migration into the decomposing body. As maggots cannot chew through skin and because the victim is found with a small colony feasting on her left hand, it suggests that she has another number. However, the cuts could have been inflicted by animals, they could be defensive wounds torn open by feasting flies. She had cuts across her stomach and arms, also filled with frenzied banqueting bugs, none of the other victims so far had shown such mutilations. She cannot be linked to the murders of Fran Lizzie Taylor or Stella McQam just yet. The victim's small purse was found, carefully tucked into place underneath a red lacy bra. The purse is empty, except for one Polaroid. The victim's money is currently being exchanged for a round at the local pub, as he treats several off-duty policemen to a pint of their choice. Her credit cards and driving licence are carefully locked in his safe.

The Polaroid is of a young woman, lying naked on the ground. The woman is covered in bruises and deep interlacing cuts, twisted jagged lines slashed across her throat. Her hands have been carefully placed across her chest, the palms face down so that the number two so cautiously carved, can be clearly seen. The young woman clearly isn't the same victim. The image is why Fletcher and Bullface have been called.

"Right, what do we know?"

"No ID, the victim is still a Jane Doe. Michaels is going through the missing persons lists. The victim was most likely killed here."

Fletcher eyes up the landscape, it looks too beautiful here. The fields are beaming serenely as the

August sun begins to set, casting a brilliant orange glare over the postcard image. Fletcher stands alert, his hairs on end as his ears tell him that this scene is too quiet, too eerie, it is as if the nearby forest is eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Something the matter?” Bullface asks, with little actual concern in her voice.

“Just wondering what she was doing out here. This is a very secluded area.” Bullface shrugs, as if to say if we knew why she was out here, we wouldn’t be out here.

“Do you think she is connected to Fran Taylor and Stella McQam?” Fletcher asks quietly.

“Right now we don’t even know if Fran and Stella are connected. There is a possibility though as the victim sustained trauma to her left hand, insect damage has made it impossible to tell if she also had a number carved into her hand. But then that picture ...” her voice trails off before quietly stating, “... there is a possibility they are connected, the victim in the photo had a number 2, Fran a 22, and Stella a 28. If the photograph was left by the same killer, then he is not just carving their ages. But without knowing what number had been carved into this victim’s hand ...” another pause, there are some things Bullface just doesn’t feel like spelling out to Fletcher. She wants to know he is capable of doing his job “You do know what this could mean, don’t you?”

“What?” Maybe Fletcher does know, but he doesn’t want to say, saying it out loud could make it true.

“There could be another twenty-four victims already.”

“Shit.”

There seems little to do now, the night shift is slowly taking over, Michaels is still ploughing through *Missings*, and the victim would not be autopsied until the morning. Both officers are tired, tomorrow morning is already beckoning with more work. Fletcher heads home, but Bullface, well Bullface doesn’t head home, there seems little point. At home there will be a husband more interested in the television than her, and two sons who are usually absent. On the rare occasions they are home, the house is rocked with blaring music and arguments. She can stand them on most nights but tonight, for a while, she needs silence. She needs to think.

Instead Bullface goes to her second home. She and her husband buy several old houses a year, slowly reviving

them for rent or resale. Her husband retired a few years ago and it seems to keep him occupied. He plasters, she paints.

Usually Bullface likes painting, an activity that allows her to be perfect and precise, allows her mind to wander, time to run through her active cases, looking for mistakes, missed leads and time to reanalyse actions. Tonight is different. She can feel the eyes watching her again, eyes of so many female ghosts hiding just out of sight. Every brush stroke echoes the same question in her head. What is the point? Splat! What is the point? What is the point? Until she gives up, wearily sitting down on the dust sheets, head lying in paint splattered hands, just trying to go on.

The night brings forth whispers, stronger allegations against The Krill. Fran Lizzie has been brought back to life by gossip. The police phone lines are again jammed with anxious relatives and journalists eager for more insight. The focus is on the mutilated victim apparently found in a church graveyard/skip/forest/lake rather than on the prostitute Stella McQam. Fear has returned, wives refuse to walk to work alone in the morning, mothers argue with daughters, the restriction for protection always misunderstood and always ending in door slams.

The morning brings an identity for Jane Doe. Michaels has spent most of her night going through page after page of smiling vacant faces on her screen contrasting them against a close up of Jane's decomposing features. Michaels was rarely bothered by these images, she'd been injured two years ago and was now desk bound, so most of the missing came to her. It was something for her to do, just a job. At first, the *Missings'* smiling faces had bothered her but now she is used to it. The decomposing face however, that is something she wants to get off her desk as soon as possible. But now Michaels is owed gratitude because thanks to her, the numberless nameless victim can be identified as Adelina Sasha.

Adelina's husband Jack Sasha will confirm her identity. Jack, Adelina's widower, but he will always call himself her husband. Later on, much later, ten years later he will still say he is married. He will rarely add "But she is dead now," not wanting to see the gleam of sadness, pity or even hope in the questioner's eyes. Not wanting to encourage a,

“How did she die?” Or an, “I am sorry.” Or even an, “Are you seeing anyone now?” asked playfully, while thrusting shrivelled breasts forward, as if to encourage the asking of a phone number.

The morgue assistants try to be tactful. They have been careful not to show him anything other than her face, but the sight of her lying there, eyes closed, sparks a flame. Jack has spent his life as an angry man, in some ways the passionate anger was what had made Adelina originally fall for him. Maybe she considered cheating on him just to reignite that dying flame, but even she would have known to move away very quickly when that vein throbs on his temple, when the left eyebrow twitches. Unfortunately no one around him now knows those warning signs, but they will learn. Jack is led into an interview room, to become someone else’s problem.

Fletcher offers him a drink, offers to call someone for Jack, but such offerings are barely acknowledged. Jack sits, forcefully holding himself down to the chair, shaking slightly. Fletcher gives Jack silence and time, time to realise what is going on. Fletcher is also a little impatient, time cannot be wasted. Finally, he breaks the sullen silence, announces the time and date of the interview into the awaiting video camera and begins.

“I am Detective Sergeant Aaron Fletcher and this is my partner Detective Sergeant Victoria Bull...rush.” Fletcher quickly continues before Bullface notices the pause. “We will be investigating your wife’s case. We need to ask you a few questions.” Fletcher pauses uncertainly, Jack still barely acknowledges his existence. His anger slowly deflating second by second, leaving behind an empty hollow man.

“How long were you and Adelina married?”

“Thirteen years.” A defeated mumble.

“Were you having any problems in your marriage?”

Jack’s eyebrow twitches again, “No.”

Fletcher thinks this may be a sensitive subject for him, rarely did someone answer so abruptly.

Jack’s posture hints that he might be waiting for the right moment to strike.

“OK, let’s talk a little bit about the day she disappeared.” Fletcher hopes to calm Jack down before coming back to his previous marital issues. There is nothing on record to say that they had an unhappy marriage, no charges of assault, no divorce pending, but still, there are always some secrets hidden away. He

chooses to use words such as ‘disappeared’ rather than ‘left’ as it implied she had wanted to leave. Little points to try and reassure Jack Sasha that, at the moment, Fletcher is on his side.

“The morning she disappeared, do you remember what had happened?”

Silence.

“Mr Sasha?”

Silence.

“Was she getting ready to go to work?”

“My wife takes Fridays off, so she didn’t have to go to work. She still got up with me and we had breakfast together.”

“What did she have to eat?”

“Grapefruit.” Evidently Jack Sasha is a man of few grunts.

“What was she wearing?”

“She was still in her nightgown.”

“What time was this?”

“’Bout eight, eight fifteen.”

“Had she told you what she planned to do that day?”

“She was going to clean and then meet a friend for lunch – like I said in the Missings’ Report.”

“Had she said who she was meeting?”

“No.”

“Did she usually go out for lunch on her own?”

“Yes.”

“Had she seemed emotional that morning?”

“She was an emotional person,” Jack Sasha does not want to relinquish the last private memories of her, doesn’t want another man to see the emotions she always showed him in the morning. Jack half sighs, half chokes an unwanted tear before continuing. “She was happy. She liked the mornings.”

“So she was in a good mood? She didn’t seem tearful or upset?”

“No!” a whisper of anger is laced in that line, Jack Sasha’s eyes meet with Fletcher’s in a flash of venom, not liking what Fletcher could be implying.

“Where did your wife like to spend her time?”

“She is at work five days a week, she works Sunday to Thursday. She usually comes straight home, most nights she will go out for a jog, Fridays she meets up with her friends, Saturdays she spends with me.” He talks mechanically, Jack is giving Fletcher the I-don’t-like-you-but-I-will-answer-your-questions look.

“Did she have any reason to be out in the countryside?”

“No.”

“Not even to go jogging?”

“I don’t know her jogging route.”

“Are any of her items missing? Like her toothbrush or any of her favourite clothes?”

“She wasn’t going to leave me.” Jack snaps.

“Please answer the question.”

“No, the only thing missing is her car.” The police have already been alerted about Adelina Sasha’s missing car. Michaels is contacting the breakdown companies.

“When did you realise she was missing?”

“She wasn’t there when I got home at six. She is always home before me.”

“Even on her days off?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“I phoned some of her friends and family, made sure she wasn’t running late. Tried her mobile too but that went straight to voice mail.”

“Did anyone say where she was?”

“No.”

“When did you contact the police?”

“The next morning, when she still hadn’t come home.” Jack’s voice is shaky now, it is beginning to hit him that his wife would never be coming home.

“Who was your wife particularly close to? We would also like to interview them, if possible.”

Jack hesitates, his grief-infused mind can only recall Adelina’s face not her friends. It takes a few silent minutes while his face visibly works for a name.

“Who is she close to in her family?” Fletcher decides to help him a little.

“Her mother, Adelina is an only child. She and her mother are pretty close.”

“Is she close to anyone at work?”

“I don’t ... I don’t think she is.”

“Any of her friends?”

“Anna.”

“What’s Anna’s last name?”

“Stevenson.”

After a few moments of silence, Fletcher asks, “Did your wife know Fran Lizzie Taylor?”

“I ... I don’t know, my wife has many friends.”

There is a swish as Bullface pulls out a photo of the living Fran Lizzie.

Jack barely glances at it before replying. "I don't recognise her."

"What were you doing on March 9th?"

"I don't remember, how is this important?"

"It was a Friday night. Please try to think."

"If it was a Friday night I probably was with Adelina. What does this have to do with anything?"

"Did your wife know Stella McQam?"

"She has a friend called Stella, I don't remember her last name, I don't think it's McQam though." There is a pause, Jack is trying to figure out what this idiot might be implying. "Why? What do these women have to do with this?"

"We think they might be connected."

"Are they suspects? Do you think these women killed..." Jack chokes on his wife's name.

Fletcher takes advantage of the pause to interrupt. "No, we don't think they are suspects. Do you recognise this woman?"

Bullface pulls out another cropped photo, the picture that had been found in Adelina Sasha's purse. They have cropped the image carefully so only the victim's face can be seen.

"No, what do these women have to do with my wife?" Anger re-laces his voice. He looks up at the two grim faces.

"Mr Sasha." Fletcher begins quietly.

"Do you believe him?" Fletcher asks Bullface tentatively.

"For now," she mutters. They are watching Jack Sasha leaving the station, his escorts closely shielding him from the waiting press. Jack still looks angry, like he might go for anyone who gets too close. He just needs an excuse to take a swing.

Through the open window, the calls of the press drift in.

"Mr Sasha! Is it true they found your wife?"

"Was she mutilated?"

"Mr Sasha! Mr Sasha!"

"Do you have anything to say to your wife's murderer?"

Jack Sasha stops despite the urging of his escorts, slowly turns to face the luckless reporter.

Bullface holds her breath, readying to run to the escorts' aid.

Sasha faces the camera. "I will find you," he

hisses. Every word is uttered clearly. "Everything you did to her, I will do to you." He leans closer into the camera, the footage picking up every throbbing vein around his bloodshot eyes. Flecks of spit hit the lens as he thunders. "I will find you." He is hurried into an awaiting car by two very anxious escorts. The footage will make the six o'clock news, along with film of Adelina's mother weeping hysterically for twenty seconds.

Jack Sasha had, before he exited so dramatically, graciously provided the officers with Anna Stevenson's contact details. She sits now in Jack's place in the conference room. Her mascara has run in thick black lines down her face, smearing into foundation with every tissue wipe. Little drips of make-up cascade onto her bright yellow shirt as Anna's face falls apart with every tear.

"I just can't believe anyone would hurt Adelina. She's such a great ..."

Fletcher clears his throat slightly nervously. Bullface fidgets in a slight discomfort.

"Ms Stevenson, I would like to ask you a few questions about your relationship with Adelina Sasha, if I may?"

"Of course, anything to help Adelina."

Bullface rolls her eyes inwardly at the cliché, she does try to be sympathetic but thinks maybe Anna Stevenson is a little too much. Particularly since Anna seemed almost flirtatious in her grief. Flirtatious to Fletcher by the way, not to Bullface.

"How did you meet Adelina Sasha?"

"I met her when we were in university, we both took business studies together." The tears are slowly drying up. Anna rubs her face with a tissue as if suddenly self-conscious. Bullface almost wants to tell her that Fletcher is married.

"So how long have you known her?"

"Nearly erm ... nearly twenty years now."

"So a long time then, you must have known her pretty well." Fletcher tries to make himself as friendly as possible, much to Bullface's disdain.

"Yes we are ..." pause, then the invariable second cliché "... we were very close."

Family and friends, Bullface thinks, sometimes just seemed to be following a script. The dramatisation of suddenly correcting the speech so that present tense becomes past, the endless 'she is' then a pause, 'she was'.

Was it the sudden realisation of the lost? Or maybe the juxtaposition of suddenly losing someone, someone special crossed with the chance of being famous, of being involved in something considered to be dramatic. Maybe this juxtaposition commanded that they all follow the same script. Then maybe, Bullface relents, they just don't know what they are saying, the correcting is just automatic. Jack Sasha hadn't used such rewording, suggesting that to him, in his mind, his wife is still very much alive. Bullface, after seeing Jack's behaviour does not want to be around when the realisation of Adelina's death finally hits him.

"So you knew her before she met Jack Sasha?"

"Yes, I was the one who introduced them." There is a slight bitterness in her voice.

"Would you say they had a happy marriage?"

"Well, Jack can sometimes be a little, well, extreme, but I think overall she had a happy marriage." There is a touch of bitterness there again. Bullface wonders if the unmarried Anna was maybe slightly jealous, but then Bullface always thinks the worst of people.

"Did she mention any problems to you?"

There is a hesitation, a pause, then Anna slowly shakes her permed hair. "She was generally happy."

"So she wasn't having any kind of problems? No financial problems? No problems at work?"

Anna's slightly uneasy look is betraying her. "Erm ... not really," comes the weak reply.

Fletcher's eyes meet hers with a gentle glare.

"She was just feeling a bit ... well old. It was her birthday last month and, well, she kept saying she was the wrong side of thirty now. She will be forty in two years and she was thinking of changing her career. You know, the average, 'I don't know where I am going sort of thing.' But she was still happy, she loved Jack."

"So she has been a little emotional lately?"

"Since she took up jogging she started to improve. I think the exercise was really doing her some good. She used to talk about..." A suddenly stop as Anna realises that she is about to betray her friend.

"What did she used to talk about?" It hasn't quite clicked with Fletcher.

"There was a guy she would see while out jogging, a youngish guy. I think she might have been a little flattered by his attention. It was all harmless though, Adelina would never cheat on Jack." She didn't add that Adelina may have been afraid of what Jack might do if he

found out.

“Was this the person she was meant to be meeting on Friday?”

“Oh no, like I said, Adelina was flattered but she would never cheat on Jack.”

“Did she mention who she was meeting?”

“She was meant to be meeting me at three, we were going to do a little shopping.”

“What did you do when she didn’t turn up?”

“I rang her a few times, but she didn’t answer. I just thought she had forgotten. We didn’t have definite plans anyway. It wasn’t till Jack called that I realised she was actually missing.”

“You didn’t tell Mr Sasha that it was you Adelina was meant to be meeting?”

“I thought I did, but I don’t know, he was really panicked. I guess he was scared she had left him or something. He might not have heard me or something.”

“Do you know the name of the guy Adelina would meet while jogging?”

“No, I don’t think she knew his name, it was just a little fun that’s all. She wouldn’t have hurt Jack or anything. Adelina used to be very pretty, I think she was just flattered that someone was noticing her again.”

“Do you know what this guy looked like?”

“No, I never met him.” Realisation hits her, her smudged eyes open wide, the pudgy mouth forming a little O. “You think he might of...”

“We need to look into every possibility.” Fletcher says gently.

In Anna’s mind however, the mystery is solved, it was a jogger who killed Adelina. Jack is cleared of all suspicions, it was a mysterious stranger who killed Adelina. A story that would be over-romanticised as Anna met her other friends for drinks and shared gossip and tears for Adelina, also strategic plans on how to ‘comfort’ Jack Sasha.

What Fletcher asks next only added extra juice to the gossip. “Did Adelina have any contact with Fran Lizzie Taylor?”

“That name does sound familiar ... I don’t think Adelina knew anyone called Fran...” Anna doesn’t want to admit that she doesn’t know all of Adelina’s friends. Then it clicks, her eyes open wide again. “She was the girl who was murdered, about six months ago. Wasn’t she?”

“So Adelina had no connection with Fran?”

“Do you think it was the same guy? Adelina was

so scared when that happened, she didn't want to go out for weeks afterwards."

"Please answer my question Ms Stevenson."

"No, I don't think she ever met Fran, if she did, she didn't mention it to me." The tone is slightly indignant as if to imply there may be other things Adelina hadn't mentioned to her.

Bullface again produces the altered photograph. "Do you recognise this girl?"

Anna gives it a long hard look, her fingers shaking on the table with fear and excitement. She is actually seeing photos! She thought that only happened in crime shows, she could be famous. Then there is a growing fear, rumours of what happened to Adelina had reached Anna, the rumours that the sight of her had made a grown man cry, and the police thought there could be other victims. That meant a ...

"She looks a little familiar, I don't know why. Has she been on telly or something? I don't think Adelina knew her though, unless she worked with her. She looks a little familiar though, but I don't know why."

"Try to think." Fletcher advises patiently. Bullface stirs slightly, if Anna recognised the unknown girl in the photograph... well it might open up a new lead or two, new possibilities. These women had to have something in common, it was just a case of finding it.

"No, I really don't know. Sorry."

Fletcher presses a business card into Anna's eager hand, with the statutory "If you remember, please give me a call."

Chapter Four

“OK, let’s go over what we know so far.” Fletcher and Bullface sit in the briefing room, two coffees and piles of paperwork spread across the table. Two other blank-faced detectives sit opposite.

“First known victim was Fran Lizzie Taylor, aged twenty-two. She was found with the number 22 carved into her left hand. The mutilation was inflicted by a scalpel or a small knife, post mortem. She was found on March 9th, at eight am, having been killed maybe six or seven hours before. She was fully clothed with no signs of sexual assault, no defensive wounds. Her throat had been slit, death was near instantaneous. She was found in an isolated area, thrown over a five foot fence.” Fletcher states all this mechanically.

Bullface continues in a similar monotone. “The dump-site felt planned; although her purse is still missing. We think this was an intentional murder rather than a robbery gone wrong. I think he took the purse for a token because everything seemed planned, we are presuming he is of rational mind, the killings are not the work of someone in a frenzy. This implies that he is an organised killer, probably won’t be mentally challenged or a drug abuser. The victim had been thrown over a five foot fence; this would take someone of a strong build and height.”

Bullface pauses to sip her coffee, wishing it were something stronger.

Fletcher takes up the report. “Several fibres had been found on the victim’s body, three of them were a match to the pub seating, two are black 75% Cotton, 25% polyester fibres, and one is unknown. No DNA has been found on the victim, evidence found at the scene is circumstantial. As you can see,” Fletcher pauses to show them one of the many photographs of Fran Lizzie’s demise. “Several cigarettes were found on the scene. DNA has been recovered but nothing is a match to anyone in our system. Other items found on the scene are listed here. All these items have been fingerprinted and DNA has been taken from them, again no matches in the system. As you can see a purse was found by our officers, in this river.” He points again to the photograph. “Along with a briefcase, neither of these items belongs to Fran Lizzie Taylor, both were reported as stolen weeks before the attack.”

“Do you have any suspects on this case?” One of the detectives asks, the other frantically scribbling notes.

“Our first suspect was Fran’s boyfriend Steven, but he has been cleared by his alibi, he was working that night, around twenty miles away. There is no chance he could have slipped out and killed her. Fran’s flatmate was also investigated, but she doesn’t seem likely.”

One eyebrow is questioningly raised at this.

“Fran’s flatmate is five foot four, she would not have been able to lift and throw Fran over a five foot fence. Her flatmate has no alibi though.”

“Anyone else?”

“Fran had been out drinking with one of her work colleagues, she left the pub alone and no one had been seen following her. At the moment we have no other suspects. None of the DNA found on the scene is a match to Fran’s family, boyfriend, flatmate or work colleagues.”

“The second victim to be found was Stella McQam, aged thirty-seven. Found yesterday. She had a number 28 carved into her right hand. Victim was a prostitute, found in a busy location, dumped in an alleyway, fully clothed, obvious signs of sexual penetration. She has been processed and the DNA is now being sent off, though it could be several months before we see the result. She had been stabbed twice in succession. Her number was inflicted shortly before or during death.” Bullface pauses again, collecting her thoughts, allowing Fletcher to take over.

“Because the attack happened in a busy area, we believe that the assailant may have dumped some of his clothes. We had officers collect the bins within a mile radius, they are currently going through them as we speak. We have seized CCTV footage and recorded eye witness statements but so far no one has seen anyone suspicious.”

“The next victim has been identified as Adelina Sasha. She was killed three or four days before Stella. Adelina was partly decomposed when she was found, she has some trauma to her left hand. As you can see, insect damage means that we cannot assume or deny that she may have been numbered. Adelina was thirty-eight, she had been reported missing by her husband. Victim was found partly dressed. She was still wearing a black skirt, white shirt, underwear and shoes. Her shirt had been undone and there were several slashes to her stomach as well as to her arms and face. Her autopsy shows that she had been drinking shortly before death, stomach contents included several sandwiches and some fruit. She was killed shortly

after eating. Cause of death was a slit throat, like Fran Lizzie Taylor.

“She was found in a secluded area, out in the fields. Her car is still missing, I have put out an APB to keep an eye out for it.”

The scribbler pauses. “Any chance she was killed by her husband?”

“Slim chance, her husband was at work at the estimated time of death. He can clearly be seen on his company’s CCTV footage for most of the day. The victim’s body indicates she had been killed where she was found. Officers are checking into his financial accounts. We are also appealing for eye-witnesses to come forward.

“We interviewed one of Adelina’s friends, there is a possibility that Adelina may have been having an affair with someone she met while jogging. The friend could not give us any more details.

“What connects Adelina to this case is a Polaroid found in her purse. Adelina’s purse was empty by the way, it seems the assailant had taken the contents. Jack Sasha identified the purse as belonging to Adelina. No fingerprints have been found on the purse or the photograph.”

A copy of the Polaroid is again pulled out and passed across to the officers. One takes it with a grimace.

“There is little possibility that the girl is alive. The assailant obviously wants us to know that there are other victims out there. She may have been his second victim.”

“Any idea what the numbers mean?”

“The most obvious one is that he is numbering each kill. This is hard to determine because we don’t know what Adelina Sasha’s number was or if she had a number. If the assailant is using a code then it is not an alphabetical code as Stella McQam was number 28 and as we know the alphabet contains only 26 letters.” Bullface feels the need to state the obvious, as she considers most of her co-workers to be idiots. “Since the numbers inflicted on the victims changes from left to right hands, there could be a possibility of two assailants. One carving on the left hand, one carving on the right, however, no other evidence can support or confirm this so far. But the difference in dump sites and modes of kill also suggests this.”

“The girl in this picture, has she been identified?”

“Not as yet, we are planning to include her in the media campaign.”

“She looks a little familiar.” A long uncomfortable pause hovers as the luckless officer tries to recall.

The other officer interrupts with an authoritative, “If there is a possibility there are twenty-four other bodies out there, then we need to look for them.”

The city is screaming with rumours. The death of Stella McQam had not caused much concern until the fresh new rumour that her death was linked to the two other deaths, and possibly even three or nine other deaths. The whispers swell, along with murmurs about mutilations, the bafflement of the police and the possibility of even more victims. Some say that an underground bomb shelter had been found out in the fields, filled with sacrificed children. Other rumours take the Blackbeard approach that all the women had been married, in secret, to a mysterious man who literally stole their hearts. The women had been found missing their eyes/teeth/hearts/fingers/toes. More postulated on the murderer himself, that Jack Sasha had broken down and confessed that Steve was his secret boyfriend. Fran Lizzie had caught them together and her death had been an accident. It had been a local politician, covering up his string of affairs. The bookie’s favourite, The Krill, was still the prime suspect, casting a metaphysical dark shadow over every conversation. What should have been a tragic death for Adelina Sasha turned into a romanticised, over-exaggerated death. What should have been a period of mourning for Jack Sasha turned into a hunting party, where over-eager blamers, reporters and not so altruistic comforters tracked him down and shrieked him into isolation.

Kain knows nothing of this, has not yet heard of the deaths, and is still smoking quietly in the darkness, completely unaware of the watching eyes.

Elizabeth Mitchell is also watching someone. She is standing next to her window, her wrinkled thin claws holding back a purple velvet drape, allowing her a full view of the house opposite. A clipboard rests on the coffee table next to her, carefully but shakily divided into columns of comings and goings. As a tall dark-clothed young man exits the house with a customary slam, she carefully notes the time and then sits back. She closes her eyes and listens to the whispering wireless as she carefully contemplates her next move.

Bullface and Fletcher split up after the meeting. Adelina Sasha’s car has finally been found, Fletcher is to examine

any findings. Bullface does not want to sit and wait for the investigator's report. She is going to check on the rubbish collected from the Stella McQam case. She is a little unnerved, actually not unnerved as such, but there is a small alarm bell ringing. It is the girl in the photograph. The photograph they had found with Adelina Sasha, the girl with a number 2 cut into her hands. She is familiar to so many people, but they still don't have as much as a name. She does seem a little familiar to Bullface too, but why? Michaels had unhappily trailed through two years' worth of *Missings* but no match. The victim's eyes are closed so there are one or two that might have been her, but unlikely. With no body, there is no way of being sure. Bullface feels that the assailant is testing them, taunting them with someone who may not even be real. Bullface has seen a lot of photo manipulation over the years but this one ... she is not quite sure. She thinks it is real but then there is still the nagging feeling. She is definitely missing something.

Six long smelly hours are spent going through the garbage. A hundred more days are required for the DNA testing phase. The burnt Missing poster with Adelina Sasha's scorched face has been noted, the offending cigarette has been processed for DNA. They are still hoping that maybe there will be a match, something from Fran Lizzie's scene matching to Stella McQam's. Just one lucky break. It would be a long wait to find out. The Missing poster bothers Bullface, is it a message from the killer? Was he mocking them with half burnt clues? It feels like he is mocking them with every kill, always whispering in the darkness, hinting at what they can't see. Bullface feels stupid for not being able to see the links, and she hates being made to feel stupid. Tension and anger are buried deep in her forehead, a permanent scowl sets heavily in her eyebrows.

There are several pieces of bloody materials, one bloody tissue and four bloody needles, but no clothes. The officers who had gone skip diving have come away with empty but contaminated hands. The two suspicious-smelling packages are also disappointing; one is a discarded rotting lunch and the other regurgitated materials, from an unfortunate drunk.

Fletcher watches as the contents of Adelina's car are emptied and slowly processed. There are the usual tissues and CDs in the side door, spare coins in the cup holder,

maps and messages in the glove box. Adelina kept her car clean and neat, the interior of the car had been vacuumed recently so the CSI were a little less hopeful about picking up some of the assailant's skin flakes or hairs, had he been in the car. At the moment the evidence suggests that Adelina had been alone in there. What is interesting to Fletcher is the make-up bag tucked carefully under the passenger seat. The bag had been filled with make-up supplies and little bottles of perfume, to him it confirms the idea that she may have been meeting a male friend rather than another female. He is now briefly eyeing Adelina's CDs, She was heavily into jazz whereas Fran Lizzie was definitely a pop girl. Fletcher doubted Stella would be that into music (he didn't know of her secret love for heavy metal.) There just seemed to be nothing connecting these girls so far, except for their gender.

The car had been found, abandoned at a lay-by some twenty minutes away from her dump-site. This part of the city isn't really the city as such. Surrounding fields and a large wood separate them from a nearby village. The fields are waiting, begging to be developed and built upon. In a few years' time that little village will be absorbed into the city as the population continues to rise. Bullface cynically sees the village as another den of thieves waiting to be enrolled. The fields and lack of land development means that there were few speed cameras out here, nothing to document Adelina's arrival or her attacker's departure. Another dead end.

A police officer pulls out a piece of paper, lost under the driver's seat. Scrawled across it in hurried handwriting read the number 282202...

Brandi Parr has heard the whispered rumours, everyone in her office has murmured something different, scaring each other at the coffee pot. Right now she can hear Marcella, on the desk opposite hers, pleading to an unknown.

"I don't care what time the game starts, please just pick me up, OK?"

Brandi doesn't have anyone to plead to, her last boyfriend is a year-old memory and her father is over a hundred miles away, bound to her nagging mother. Brandi doesn't care though, the likelihood of someone actually picking on her is low.

Brandi methodically chews on her lunch of lettuce leaves, despising the bland taste. She longs for a nice burger or even a Chinese take-away. Oh how her mother

would love that, she would be able to choose between the “*You are not taking care of yourself properly.*” Or the, “*How will you ever get a man if you a) don’t learn to cook properly, b) keeping piling on those pounds.*” Inevitably ending with the “*You are not getting any younger you know.*”

Brandi viciously stabs another lettuce leaf.

Marcella’s voice rises to a whining squeak. “Because I don’t want to walk home alone, you heard what happened to those girls!” Marcella is close to tears.

Brandi feels a small stab of glee as Little Miss Perfect Marcella is brought down a peg or two.

“Fine! But if anything happens to me, you will be sorry!” With the tearful threat comes the dramatic disconnect and the slam as the mobile phone hits the table in anger.

Brandi quickly ducks her head, pretending to be engaged in her lettuce. The chubby girl next to Marcella slides over with tissues, advice and the sympathetic, “I will walk home with you.” Which of course Marcella graciously accepts. Brandi chews another lettuce leaf thoughtfully. That is another thing, no one cares if she walks home alone but if Miss High and Mighty Marcella has to, well, bring in the whole office as convoy! Can’t let Marcella go home alone. The lettuce leaves are not the only thing leaving a bad taste in Brandi’s mouth.

Fletcher stares at the bagged piece of paper, the one they had found in Adelina’s car. 282202. Stella, 28; Fran, 22; Unknown girl, 02. 282202. His hands shake in excitement. Is this a piece of evidence that could connect the four girls? He does a quick second guess in his mind, 2-B, 8-H, 0-? All equals BHBB-B ... no that definitely doesn’t mean anything. It could be in the right order – newest victim first ... was he just cataloguing his previous kills? But then 28 had been killed after Adelina. Did he know that they wouldn’t find her car until after they found 28? How could he have known that?

Bullface leans over his shoulder, interrupting his thoughts. “Is it a phone number?” She asks in a bored tone.

“What?”

“Have you tried ringing that number?”

“Err...” Fletcher does not want to admit that he hadn’t thought of that. Though that did lead to another possibility, that the assailant had given Adelina his phone number.

Bullface pushes the phone towards him with contempt.

Bullface does want this to mean something, to be a clue of some sort but then the simplest explanation is usually the correct one, it always has to be considered. The writing to her, suggested female more than male. Despite the obvious hurry the writer had been in, there was still a clear concise element to the numbers.

Fletcher dials, just willing Bullface to be wrong, just to show her he wasn't that incompetent. The phone rings and rings. Fletcher's heart gives a small lurch when a breathless female answers.

"Hello?"

"H-hello." Fletcher mutters, the answering female sounds slightly familiar.

The voice is almost flirtatious. "Who is this?"

"This is Detective Sergeant Aaron Fletcher, who am I speaking to?"

"Well hello, Mr Fletcher," says the voice eagerly. "This is Anna Stevenson. We met earlier."

In Fletcher's mind, there are a few possibilities. One, Anna Stevenson is the next targeted victim. The assailant may have left her number in the car on purpose. This theory is ruled out when Anna confirms she had changed her phone number recently and had written it down for Adelina.

Anna agrees to come back in so they can check the handwriting. "I can be there in ten minutes," she twinkles excitedly.

Possibility two, the assailant may have seen the number in Adelina's car and may still target Anna. Fletcher knows this is a weak possibility since the evidence is showing that the assailant had not, in all likelihood, even entered the car. Still the paper will be fingerprinted just to make sure. The clearest prospect is that this was just coincidence. Fletcher does not like coincidences.

Bullface is no longer paying any attention to the phone call. Something has caught her eye. The alarm bells are shrieking. To Fletcher's surprise, she slowly stands up, and walks across the crowded sea of desks. The answer has been staring at them all for months now. Anna's question of "*Has she been on telly or something?*" makes sense now, because she had been on TV. She would look familiar to all the officers here because her face, her reconstructed face has been staring out at them all, watching them from a poster for weeks now. The victim in the photograph looks very similar to the Jane Doe 217. The one that had been

found in the forest. The reconstructed facial image of the one who has not yet been identified, Victim number 2.

Fletcher wearily slides into his car. It is seven pm, his shift was meant to finish at five but ... well, everything just keeps hitting. The Jane Doe 217 case has been passed over to them, not that there is much to pass over. The biggest hardest hit is from the fact that Jane Doe 217's death had been estimated from anything from three to five years. If she is victim number 2 and she was killed five years ago, then it strengthens the most stressing theory, that the assailant is actually numbering his kills not coding them. Stella McQam is victim number 28, meaning that in the period of three to five years, this man has killed twenty-eight people and they had only found four bodies. Fletcher's head is pounding, as he dry-swallows two aspirins from the emergency stash in his car. If Fran Lizzie is victim number 22 and she was killed just six months ago, then the assailant has killed six females in six months without being caught. How? The city is hiding the bodies somewhere but where? Bullface has put forward a theory of a mass grave site, somewhere remote and hidden and Fletcher feels now inclined to agree. The faceless females seem to be screaming at him, every time he tries to close his eyes and think.

Fletcher slowly drives home, every vein in his body is growling. Fletcher wants nothing more than to go to the nearest pub, order the strongest mind rotter and just keep drinking until all this goes away. He knows at home, Claire will be waiting, ready to yell at him for coming home so late. Stabbing more thorns in his head with the crying and fresh new arguments. Maybe she won't be there, she may have vanished, to complain to her mother or friends about how her useless husband is never home, never did this or never fixed that. There would be flowers to buy, chocolates to console but still the silent treatment will last until this hell is over. Then again maybe Claire will be more supportive this time. Fear can do strange things to people and Claire might be too scared to go anywhere alone. Fletcher feels the panic began to rise, the bile leaning on the back of his throat. Claire did go places alone, she always said that she wasn't scared of anything. It is one of the things Fletcher likes about her, that she will take on anything. From sky diving to roller-blading, anything she is dared to do, she will do it. There is no stopping Claire, no scaring Claire ... which means that

while everyone else starts to take precautions, watch their shadows, Claire will charge straight out into the open, declaring that she is not afraid. That she can take on any man. Fletcher has seen what had happens to those who have taken on this man and ... and ... how can he tell Claire to be careful? She will just look at him with scorn in her eyes and tell him life is too short to be afraid. If Fletcher is to keep on working overtime then Claire will be on her own more and more. Maybe the assailant is watching her right now. Fletcher's foot automatically presses harder on the accelerator. His head pulls into a tight vice of worry. Could be watching her right now. She could already be dead! A car suddenly pulls out in front of him, causing him to slam down hard on the brake. The cursing drivers behind him suddenly protest with horn blasts. His heart is palpitating erratically, his hands shake as he restarts the engine and takes a deep breath.

His wife is waiting at the door, with an angry look that says, "Where have you been?"

Fletcher pulls her into a tight embrace and says nothing.

Saturday morning, seven a.m., they start. All off duty police officers, community volunteers gather at the meeting point. Two hundred people are divided into groups, and each given an area to search. Today they will be hitting the forest and as many of the surrounding fields as possible – the area where two bodies have already been found. These officers will be looking closely for visual signs of bodies, searching under every leaf pile, in every crowded thicket. Other professionals have also been brought in to follow and search for disturbances in the ground, looking for body-shaped disturbances in the earth's magnetic field, looking for changes in soil texture. Unfortunately, despite their knowledge, experience and equipment, Joanna Reagan's remains will stay shrouded in soil.

One officer irritably jabs a stick into some bushes. He is annoyed, his arms and legs are covered with itching insect bites. Why am I giving up my weekend for this? I could be playing football, I could be ... his thoughts are interrupted as his stick becomes stuck on something. Great! Another dead animal! Angrily he pulls the bush aside to become face to face with decomposition. A stench of rotting carcass hits his mouth, as he lets out a vomit

choked scream before collapsing forward next to the festering body of one former Thomas Goldrick.

They would eventually conclude that Thomas Goldrick died of unknown reasons, his body too badly decomposed for a coroner to determine. His history of heart problems and age, lead them to determine that Thomas had become confused on the way home and, despite living in the same area all his life, took the wrong path and wandered lost until the heart attack hit. It is a loose theory, and his widow will eventually accept it.

Down by the river, where nobody goes, there is a small bundle of clothes, a wishy and a washy and a one, two, three... Her screams echo across the forest.

A volunteer has been aiding several officers who are dragging the river. Her job is to catalogue everything they pull out. Throwing discarded bottles and cans into recycling bags, rubbish into rubbish bags. She feels a small sense of pride from just cleaning the river, admiring how nice it looks. Maybe, she thinks, maybe she will bring her children down here, it will be a nice place for a picnic. She smiles with the thought, already seeing her children playing in the trees as her eyes catch sight of a small glimpse of blue – a blanket, hidden under a nearby bush. More abandoned clothes. The blanket feels heavy as she lifts it out from its nesting place. Puzzled, she pulls back the folds and begins to scream. A day-old baby smothered in the blanket. His mother will never be found.

There is a small air of depression, despair and anger as the search groups slowly leave, several volunteers sobbing. One officer will never be able to forget the smell of decomposition. The forest has only given up two secrets, neither of them relevant to the actual case. They return the next day, the forest is gloomy and dark. The search continues with sleepless eyes and trembling fingers. The groups are less eager now, the tragedies of the previous day have swatted all enthusiasm. Some people are hoping not to find a body, not to have to see. The searchers are still diligent though, despite aching limbs from the previous day's search, despite itching bug bites. They check as much as they can for hours and hours, but nothing. They stop briefly as food and refreshments are brought out by other volunteers, search for a few hours more before finally giving up and heading home, empty handed, to

neglected families.

Michaels has been supervising the comings and goings on both days. She has been left at the meeting point alone, with food and water supplies for the group, monitoring the sign-ins and outs. They are calling it a day now, the sun is beginning to dip low in the sky, rain is threatening. The sad search will begin next weekend. Her finger runs down the lists, looking for anyone who hasn't already signed out. 34 – Susanna Hardy.

“This is base calling 34, this is base calling 34.”

“34 here.”

“Time to come home 34.”

“Be ten minutes, base.”

“Roger.”

57 – Michael Jennings.

“This is base calling 57, this is base calling 57.”

“Did you say 57?”

“Yes, 57”

“57 here.”

“Time to come home, 57.”

“Sign me out Base.”

“Roger.”

133 – Shannon Leona

“This is base calling 133. This is base calling 133.”

Static fizzles down the radio, Michaels slaps the walkie talkie in annoyance.

“This is base calling 133. This is base calling 133.”

Silence across the frequency.

“This is base calling 133. Please come in 133”

Silence.

Chapter Five

Four hundred people take the train into the city every weekday. Most of them sleepwalk in, their eyes half closed in the last throes of slumber. Some use the morning to catch up on paperwork, hurrying through unimportant documents. Some flirt. No one really looks out the window any more, the view never changes. The first train passes within seconds, a chug chug blowing dust over frozen eyes.

The second train passes ten minutes later. One person sees something but isn't quite sure. It is just a trick of light, the train is going too fast to really see ... but it looks like ... but it isn't ... definitely not. No one else is reacting, was just a trick of light.

It takes five trains before someone alerts the guard, who doesn't really take the teenager seriously, despite the wide-eyed pleading, the I-know-what-I-saw, it was a dead woman! The defiant teenager is met with reassurances and eye rolls from the guard who has heard it all before. The teenager sits back in his seat, arms crossed, angrily glaring at the other passengers, protesting that he knows what he saw. No one believes him.

Sixth train, people are more awake now. When one woman screams, the rest of the carriage pay attention. Several people catch the glimpse of flesh and blood as it speeds past their window. Some people say that it is just a prank, a really nasty prank. Others babble incoherently, arriving at work on edge, shaking and babbling until their boss finally sends them home. The nearest station is radioed and a police car is dispatched. At this point no one is really taking the call seriously. It isn't until the order comes through for trains to be diverted, until several cars speed past, their sirens blazing that the realisation hits.

She had been dumped in front of the tunnel, her bloodied head resting against the mossy bricks. Her bruised, clothed body resting at a slant, her cut hand hidden behind her back as if to hide her shame from the cameras, her walkie-talkie still giving off a dying bleep. A female that most of the assembled knew. A female some of them had spent the night searching the forest for, wanting to believe that she had become lost, tripped. 133 - Special Constable Shannon Leona.

Shannon Leona had volunteered to become a Special

Constable seven years ago. It was how she met her husband Robert Leona, Robbie Bobbie, one of the full-time officers. She worked part-time as a nursery assistant, and then volunteered part-time with the police force. She did it because she wanted to help the world. She did it because it felt good, the police force felt a little like family. There had been resentment when she first signed up, the ritual hazing but slowly she was accepted. Her relationship with Robert helped. Shannon would take the Friday night shifts, volunteer to talk down drunk teenagers, never cared when her shoes were vomited on, never scared when someone tried to take a swing. She had a reputation in the force for being able to calm down almost anyone, no matter what the situation.

She would have been horrified to be remembered this way, that her friends had to see her like this. She prided herself on being a strong woman, never allowing herself, even at school, to submit to any humiliation. She had been dragged and beaten but she fought as long as she could. Smashing against the cold confines, screaming through a bloody gag, kicking as hard as she could.

In the end, she only amused him. He enjoys reliving that moment when her eyes widened with ... recognition.

Robbie Bobbie was given his nick-name by his colleagues, and took it in good part. He took most things with a wide grin. The class clown at school, the class clown at work. Now his eyes are cold and hollow as his partner takes him aside and begins to tell him the news. It takes six colleagues to hold him back, to stop him from running over to the crime scene. He just won't stop struggling and screaming and scratching, half pulling the others across the floor before he finally breaks against the human wall, collapsing into his partner with tears in his eyes.

Robert Leona would never return to work after that day, couldn't stand to see his wife being slowly replaced. Couldn't stand to see the pictures pinned to the board. Couldn't stand to see the colleagues who failed to protect her. Couldn't stand to be a suspect.

They had to bring in another pair of detectives from a different district, detectives who had no connection to Shannon or Robert Leona. Despite the link to the other victims, this case had to be worked separately. Once the

detectives had cleared Bullface and Fletcher, then they could begin interviewing every officer, every volunteer who had helped with the search, had to dredge through every work place conflict involving the Leonas, the old rivalries and misunderstandings. Poke through any case involving either of the Leonas to try and find any resentful party. They would be there for a long unwelcomed time.

Fletcher and Bullface have been relieved of all other open cases. Their sole occupation centres on the Numbers murders. Both can feel the pressure mounting, Shannon's murder means that the entire district is watching them, making sure no one slips up, nothing slips away. There is an anger buzzing in the air, the station is a thunderstorm of anger at not protecting one of their own. Anger at Fletcher and Bullface for not catching this guy yet, anger at each other, anger at other people's anger. The station is now motivated, powered and fuelled by anger. Anger which is always a catalyst for catastrophe.

Bullface tries to escape from the station as much as possible, taking any opportunity to leave. She feels like the station is smothering her. Just like her first marriage had smothered her in blame and anger. The accusing eyes are haunting her again and she wants out, wants this to be over. Fletcher tries to soothe, he tries to be everyone's friend. He knows that people need to see him working, need a punchbag, need to be reassured that they are actually doing something, but so far the results are disappointing and no one will forgive him for that. Even though they see he is working hard and even though they know it is not his fault. The assailant has managed to pull an entire station apart with one single well-planned murder.

The other detectives are not helping. Interviews by Dalbiac and Vogel have ended with officers storming out, swearing, launching a formal complaint or all three. No one so far had come out smiling. To Fletcher, they seem to be making a bad situation even worse. He was one of the first to be interviewed and had been grilled almost abusively about the lack of progress on the case. While those detectives are there, everyone in the station suspects everyone else, hating and resenting the implication that one of their own could have done that, that to Shannon Leona.

It's funeral week, Stella McQam is cremated with little ceremony. No family attend, just three of her friends.

Unknowingly, as they sob, they are watched by waiting cameras. Adelina's funeral is next, closed casket. Adelina's funeral is crowded, the sobbers gathered in close, the chorus of cries echoes from grave stone to grave stone. Jack Sasha stands protectively close to his wife's casket. The fierce anger has faded, his face is a chiselled blank. Jack is accepting the, "*I am sorry - if there is anything I can do.*" The handshakes with small nods. He barely notices who is talking to him. This is fortunate for the mousey woman. She approaches Jack with her head fixed on the ground. She has deliberately worn the same dress that she had worn to her daughter's funeral. She has caught a few of the mourners staring at her, trying to figure out who she is. She waits on the outsides of the throes, waiting to catch Jack on his own. She knows, from her own sad experience, that being alone at the funeral is a rarely given reprieve.

She whispers in his ear, "May I talk to you, Mr Sasha?"

The response is an immediate scowl, "Leave me alone."

"Please, Mr Sasha."

Jack Sasha growls at her.

"I am not a reporter."

"Then who the fuck are you?" Jack glares at the mousey woman.

"My name is Jennifer Taylor."

He doesn't recognise her, why would he? Her daughter's death had not attracted the same amount of attention. She had not appeared on the news threatening revenge. "I am Fran Lizzie Taylor's mother." She says with a hushed whisper.

Anna Stevenson is also at the funeral. She wears carefully selected black strappy heels, ones that Adelina would have approved of. Ones that say, I can be sexy but still sorrowful. Also she wears a skimpy black dress, carefully designed to minimise her flabby gut. Her make-up has been carefully chosen for its waterproof elements and has been slightly reapplied. She is going for it – well she would be, had Jack not walked off with the strange timid women who had approached him moments before. She and Jack disappear behind another gravestone, much to the astonishment of the other bereaved. Anna is not impressed. Adelina's mother has started wailing again, unhappy that her daughter's husband is already cavorting with another.

Anna stares at the red rose and white lily arrangements that surround the cut in the earth. A stone sinks deep within her stomach, it is finally hitting just whose funeral she is attending. For the first time Anna Stevenson feels ashamed of herself, slowly backing away, alone to her car, to collapse in a gooey pile of tears.

Shannon Leona's funeral will be on Friday. Her autopsied body has finally been released. Officers who had attended the search are still under suspicion. Some have even been warned that perhaps they should not attend Shannon's funeral, particularly those who were members of Shannon's search group and the unfortunate officers who had arrived back late.

Fletcher lies in bed, listening to his wife's slightly congested breathing. His eyes are burning, red raw from too many late nights, his whole body throbs in the throes of exhaustion yet he cannot sleep. His mind runs over every single event, trying to find that single elusive clue that he knows they have missed. Should he go out now? Begin a random search alone, the guy could be killing right now, what is he doing lying in bed? If someone died tonight it would be his fault.

But then that's why they employed night staff, who are all vaguely competent, he is only human after all and humans need sleep. Even the killer needs sleep.

Shannon's death hurts, their biggest failure yet. Robert Leona was a good friend; they had been on the same rugby team for eight years. He had attended Robbie's stag night, Robbie laughing his way through the night. It could have been Claire. Playing little juvenile tricks on his fellow officers, forcing them all to dress up as super heroes. His mind plays their wedding over and over. Could have been Claire. The smiling Shannon looking up at Robbie. Could have been Claire. Now Robert won't even talk to him, won't answer the phone, won't return his calls. Robert's message is clear, leave me alone.

Were there more out there? Had he killed Shannon to stop them from getting too close? Her death had brought chaos to the station, no one was willing to revisit the site. Had she stumbled across something? There were victims out there, there had to be. But trying to get another search organised was met with open hostility and anger. Fletcher was not respecting the dead. But then he knew what number that had been embedded in Shannon's hand. They didn't. They had found number 2, Jane Doe 217; number 22, Fran Lizzie Taylor; number 28, Stella McQam;

unknown number, Adelina Sasha and now, the left hand of Shannon Leona had revealed the number 30.

Sometimes Aaron Fletcher wishes he had chosen a different career, one which allows him to sleep at night without feeling guilty.

Shannon's death had made the news more dramatically than Adelina's. Someone had reminded them of Fran Lizzie's death and hinted that maybe all three deaths were connected. Not to be outdone, someone else also reminded them of the death that hadn't even made the news yet – the prostitute Stella McQam. Rumour-mongers were plagued with questions, had Shannon, Adelina and Fran also been posing as working girls? Not to darken the honourable Leona's name, but maybe she had been working undercover? Or over the covers? Had the girls known each other? A secret government connection? The hidden Charlie's angels? These questions were usually met with anger, even from Fran Lizzie's father, who used to be a mild tempered man. Jack Sasha had stopped answering his phone. Steve, Fran's boyfriend, left the city, and Robert Leona filed harassment charges against anyone who dared to knock on his door, even against those who used to be his co-workers. The shocking aspect of a Special Constable being brutally struck down in the line of duty made even national news. The police station was swamped with calls from the indignant, demanding to know more.

The news coverage means that Shannon Leona cannot be buried peacefully. Her family are torn between honouring her, with a large open funeral that anyone she had known or helped could attend. But this also meant that He could attend, He could be picking out someone else, there at her funeral. The press and police force would also be there, trying to find a good story, keep the peace, most people would be there to gape, not to care. Or maybe a quiet little cremation which only close family could attend. But then Shannon may be forgotten this way, her death losing its meaning. Shannon's mother drank a bottle of gin a day during the decision-making battle. Robert Leona started smoking again. No one was coping well. Robert felt conflicted between leaving his wife to suffocate in the dirt or to burn. He had seen her, insisted on seeing her. Didn't want her to spend a minute longer in the Morgue, wants her to come home, to be safe. He has heard of cases, of tombstone vandalism, of killers returning to graves and can't face it, can't face him taunting her again. He is torn

between tears and anger until finally they decide that she should come home. She will be safer at home. Shannon hated fuss, had always hated fuss, even their wedding was simple. Her dress had been brought on sale, nothing could be flamboyant. Robert knew his wife well, she had never wanted to be a victim and he could not stand her being remembered as one. Finally, they agreed on a small ceremony, allowing the police force to honour the fallen, no cameras, no press, no well-wishers.

Then just as quickly it is over. The phone keeps ringing. Little notes and cards are still pushed through his door. Robert knows they will stop after a while, they will give up and circle the next tragedy. The ashes of his wife are now safe, hidden away from the scavengers. He sits alone in his empty house, his hands clutching a carefully worded note from one Mrs Jennifer Taylor.