

**CLARE DONOGHUE**

**NEVER LOOK BACK**

PAN BOOKS



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# PROLOGUE

*21 January – Tuesday*

He licked his thumb and forefinger, closed his right eye and pushed the thread through the eye of the needle. He never used machines. They snagged the material, pulling and ripping at his treasures. If a section was damaged, nothing could be done. He had no access to more and besides, a secondary piece wouldn't be the same. He looked down at his hands. His knuckles were red and chapped and his fingers were trembling. He needed to rest.

He climbed the stairs, walked into the bathroom, over to the sink, pulled on the shaving light and looked at his reflection. His hair stood up at odd angles. It looked almost sculpted. A chuckle rumbled in his throat but as it rose into his mouth it turned into a cough, hacking, tugging at his lungs. He turned and walked out, dragging his feet, aware of the stench wafting up from his body, his clothes, his hands.

His eyes felt heavy, his joints seeming to solidify as he made unsteady progress towards his bedroom at the back of the house. The rain was loud, the cold it brought seeping through the windows, chilling his bones. He stopped at the

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door to the spare room, pushed it open with the heel of his hand and looked in. His eyes drifted back and forth over colour, patterns, all different, all alive. It wouldn't be long before he was ready.

# 1

*22 January – Wednesday*

Debbie stepped off the train at East Dulwich station, misjudged the drop and stumbled onto the platform. Icy breezes found their way beneath her jacket, pinching at her skin. She could feel eyes on her as other commuters watched her unsteady progress towards the exit, her cheeks burning as the January wind snapped at her face. She had considered splashing out on a taxi but it was more hassle than it was worth. None of the black cabs wanted to go south of the river. Whenever she said, 'Nunhead, please,' she would invariably get the same response. 'Just clockin' off, luv,' or 'I'm on my way home, only got time for a local drop-off.' South-east London was essentially a dead zone. No chance of a return fare. No chance of a taxi.

She reached the steps, the cold concrete penetrating the thin soles of her shoes, her toes tingling. She slipped, dropping her handbag but managing to right herself as she watched it tumble down to the bottom of the steps, its contents spilling out onto the dirty pavement: an empty wallet, an empty jewellery case and two packets of paracetamol. She stood,

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rearranging her grey pinstripe skirt, her fingers finding the broken zip. He had been rough tonight.

The night air was making her feel light-headed. She pressed the button at the traffic lights and waited, resting her head back on her shoulders, her body swaying. A bus stopped in front of her, its exhaust catching in her throat. She tipped her head forward and looked at her reflection in the shadowed windows. Her hair was a mess, strands hanging around her face, limp and lifeless. Even in this light she could see the smudges of mascara under her eyes. Why would he want her? She pushed the button for the lights again, her hand lingering, eager for the support.

She looked up the road at Lordship Lane. It was the 'in' place to be, trendy wine bars and gastropubs lining the streets, charging a fortune for their imported spirits with unpronounceable names. Groups of fashionable twenty-somethings huddled under the heaters outside The Bishop, their faces glowing red as they took drags on their cigarettes. Debbie doubted any of them had ever ventured into Peckham itself, despite it being less than a mile away. She watched as a group of girls waved and called to friends on the other side of the street, their smiles visible, their happiness evident. She would never be like them.

When the lights changed, she limped across the road. Goose Green Park stretched into the darkness on her left. The children's play area was shadowed and still. She turned away, preferring to focus on the houses and flats on the other side of the road. The lights glowing from numerous windows comforted her. She reached into her handbag, her cold fingers searching until they closed around her phone. She dialled

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her brother's number, thankful when it went straight to voice-mail. 'Hey, Tom, it's me,' she said, trying to control the slur in her voice. 'I'm gonna come over tomorrow night with Mum. I've had a tough day. Give my love to Jules and kiss baby Jake. Bye.' She ended the call and dropped her phone back into her bag. It was quarter to nine. The baby would be in bed by now anyway.

As she approached the lights of the Tesco Metro she was looking for a gap in the traffic to cross when something stopped her. A shiver worked its way up from her aching feet to her throbbing head. Now she was away from Lordship Lane, the pavements were almost empty. She stared into the park, at the trees. Was there someone standing there in the darkness? She turned away and ran across the road, the sound of a car horn echoing behind her.

'Damn it,' she said, slipping on a patch of ice. She needed cash for tomorrow. Another birthday in the office and another fiver she would never see again. She walked over to the cash machine at the side of the Tesco, struggling with her purse until she finally got her card out. She punched in her PIN and waited. A breeze brushed the hairs on her neck; it felt warm.

'Don't turn around . . . please.' The voice was low; the whisper sent his breath right into her ear.

'What . . .?' Her voice sounded hoarse.

'Good evening, Deborah.' He stretched out her name, enunciating the syllables as if talking to a child, flattening his body against hers. She felt something sharp digging into her ribs. Her eyes darted to either side but she couldn't see anyone. She replayed his words in her head. How did he

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know her name? Her stomach dropped, her mouth suddenly dry. 'I'd like you to take a few steps into the alley there,' he said, his voice calm.

She wanted to vomit but she remained motionless, mute, as he whispered like a lover in her ear. 'Please . . .' she croaked, 'just take what you want.' Tears fell onto her cheeks and lips. She knew she should shout, run, anything, but she couldn't.

'I can see I am going to have to be more direct.' His voice dropped to a low rumble.

It was then that she knew who he was. He was the eyes she had felt watching her on the platform, the shiver that ran down her spine when she had crossed the road. As the knife punctured her skin she realized he had been with her for weeks: following her. Her bladder let go. The warm urine soaked into her underwear and tights.

He put his arm around her waist, her feet barely touching the ground as he walked her towards the alleyway at the corner of the building. She had never felt so small in her life. 'Please . . . please, don't do this.' Debbie didn't recognize her own voice; her words slurred, her breathing laboured. She fought to stay conscious as he lifted her into his arms. The lights of the car park were fading but she could see a figure standing in the darkness. She tried to cry out but could make no sound. All she could hear was his voice, whispering in her ear.



## 2

*23 January – Thursday*

DI Mike Lockyer opened his eyes, unable to ignore the insistent buzzing of his mobile. He picked it up and rolled onto his back. ‘Hello,’ he said, stifling a yawn. There wasn’t a trace of daylight around his curtains so it was early, very early.

‘Morning, sir.’

He sat up and looked over at his alarm clock. A call at 4.10 a.m. from Jane Bennett, his senior detective sergeant on Lewisham’s murder squad, wasn’t good. ‘Morning, Jane. What’s up?’

‘We are, sir,’ she said, no trace of sleep in her voice.

He tried to engage his brain as he grabbed a pair of boxers from a pile of clean washing and dragged on yesterday’s suit trousers, already scanning his bedroom for some deodorant. ‘Go on.’

‘The on-call team are on site. East Dulwich Road, Tesco Metro, SE22 9BD. Female. Eighteen. DOA . . . it looks like there might be a connection to the Atherton and Pearson cases, sir.’ She might not sound tired but he recognized tension when he heard it.

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'I'll be there in ten minutes. Anything else?' he asked, already walking out of his bedroom, down the hallway, grabbing his jacket and coat as he passed.

'No. Ballinger is the DI on call, so he'll fill you in when you arrive. I've called the team in. Do you want me with you, or shall I get things prepped here, for when you get into the office?'

'You stay put. I'll brief everyone as soon as I arrive.' He was about to hang up when he heard her clear her throat. 'Is there something else, Jane?'

There was a slight pause on the other end of the phone. 'The chief asked me to tell you . . . to mention that he wants the scene processed ASAP. He doesn't want . . . in his words, "a media circus" invading Peckham again.'

'I'm sure he doesn't,' Lockyer said, slamming his front door, a gust of freezing wind hitting him full in the face. 'I'll see you in a sec.'

Lockyer zipped up his jacket as he approached the officer in charge of the outer perimeter. He couldn't help but be slightly amused as she struggled to hold the police tape aloft for him. The scent of her perfume filled his nostrils as he brushed past. It was strong, way too strong for 4.30 in the morning.

'Thank you, Officer,' he said, trying not to breathe in any more of the musky odour.

A thin layer of ice crunched beneath his feet as he crossed the road. The temporary traffic lights were on red, the ice reflecting the colour onto his shoes and legs. It looked like he was walking through a pool of blood.

East Dulwich Road was deserted, apart from four police

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vehicles, the SOCOs' van and a redundant ambulance. The squad cars' flashing lights cast an eerie glow over the supermarket car park. A low muttering was coming from the alleyway that ran alongside the Tesco Metro, a squat red-brick building. It had only opened three months ago and already its reputation was tarnished by violent crime. A sixteen-year-old had been stabbed two weeks ago for his mobile phone and last week three young people lost their lives in the car park in a gangland dispute over territory. Nothing stayed unblemished for long; not in his experience, anyway.

The Tesco itself was fronted by a wall of glass. The shadowed panes seemed to watch him, distorting his tall frame into a ghastly image. His head looked tiny, his torso stunted and his legs stick-thin and fun-house long. He looked away and veered towards the alley.

Three dead girls.

Phoebe Atherton, twenty, body found on 14 December on the edge of Camberwell New Cemetery. Katy Pearson, twenty-two, body found on 4 January by a group of twelve-year-olds in New Cross. An image of Katy Pearson's body, discarded like a piece of rubbish on scrubland behind the Hobgoblin pub, flashed into his mind. His team weren't dealing with the case but he had seen the crime-scene photographs. The poor girl had been no more than twenty feet away from help during the entire attack.

Both of the girls had had their wrists cut, then they were raped and finally their throats were slashed. The wrist wounds hadn't been the killing stroke, but the more the girls struggled during the sexual assault, the faster their blood would have been pumped out of their bodies. The thought

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made his palms sweat. He stopped and took a lungful of the January air, grateful now for the bite of cold on the back of his throat.

There was no confirmation of a link between Katy and Phoebe, not officially, but the whispers around the squad were getting louder. This body wasn't going to do anything to quieten the rumours. All three murder sites were within two miles of each other. If the modus operandi was consistent with the others, he and the murder squad could potentially be dealing with south-east London's first serial killer. It felt like he had wandered onto a film set instead of an unremarkable suburban street in East Dulwich.

He approached the inner cordon at the mouth of the alleyway and dragged on some shoe covers held out to him by another young officer. It was only then that the smell hit him. The cold would have slowed down the first stages of decomposition but there was no mistaking the sweet, metallic odour of blood.

The scene of the crime officers had laid down numerous three-by-two platforms of toughened plastic to protect the site. He stepped up onto one of them, aware that he was inches away from vital evidence. The platforms criss-crossing the piles of debris made the scene look like some sick collage, the forensics team hovering around the body, obscuring Lockyer's view. All he could see were two bare feet.

'Mike, delighted you could make it. I was entering rigor myself waiting for you.' Dave Simpson stood and walked towards him, removing his gloves.

'David. What have we got?' Lockyer asked, resting a hand on his friend's shoulder. Dave was the senior pathologist for

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Southwark. His district included the boroughs of Greenwich, Lambeth and Lewisham. It was a massive area to cover and meant a lot of overtime. He dealt with everything: gang-related shootings, a young girl stabbed to death for twenty pounds, a mercy killing in New Cross, a man beaten to death by his neighbour because of a kid's bike, and that was a quiet week. Every hour the poor sod had worked seemed etched on his face.

'Female, Deborah Stevens, eighteen years old . . . and we're looking at the same MO as the others. It's too early for me to officially confirm but . . . unofficially, you're looking for the same man. Wrists, rape, throat.' Dave shrugged.

He stepped over to another platform to get a better look at the shrouded body. 'How long are these guys gonna be?' Lockyer motioned towards the SOCOs.

'They're almost done. Five minutes. Once they're done I'll talk you through what I have so far and we can discuss the . . . differences.'

'Differences? You just said it was the same MO?'

'It is, bar a couple of things.' Dave put his finger to his lips. 'I'd prefer to talk to you about them when this lot have gone. Lot of ears here.'

'Can we get this scene cleared, now?' Lockyer's tone left no room for interpretation. The group of bent figures finally acknowledged his presence and began shuffling out of the alley, their papery outfits crackling as they went. 'So? Come on. I don't want to waste any time if you've got something I can move on.' He took a step towards the body but Dave stopped him. 'What's up with you?' he asked, looking at Dave and the firm hand holding his arm.

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‘Before we go and look at her, there are two things,’ Dave said.

‘And they are?’

‘Firstly, there are two additions to the MO. It appears that the attacker used a knife to initially subdue the victim and then drugged her. I won’t know for certain until I have her on the table, but she has a puncture wound just below her ribs and an entry site and bruising on her neck.’

‘I’ll need confirmation on that ASAP. If the suspect bought or stole prescription drugs, it could be a great lead.’ Lockyer was already thinking who in the Serious and Organized Crime Division would be the best person to ask about purchasing or stealing prescription medication. ‘And . . . the second thing?’ Dave didn’t answer. Lockyer looked down at the hand still holding his arm. ‘What the hell is up with you?’ he asked, trying again to shake free of his friend’s grip.

‘I just want you to be prepared before you see her. She . . . I mean . . . there’s a resemblance to . . .’ Dave drifted into silence and seemed to be looking everywhere but at Lockyer.

‘Come on, Dave . . . what resemblance?’ He wrenched out of Dave’s grip and stepped towards the body. Her bare feet were smeared with mud and filth from the alleyway. Her scraped knees were splayed outward, her right leg lying at an awkward angle with what looked like badly torn tights stuck to her thigh. Her skin was translucent. A sheet covered her torso but Lockyer could still see the blood. It looked viscous, like oil. It had pooled around her wrists where they had been cut.

As he took another step forward the victim’s face came into view. Her auburn hair was plastered against her right

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cheek. He squatted next to her and tilted his head to look into her lifeless eyes. 'Oh my God,' he whispered.

'That's what I was trying to tell you,' Dave said, pulling him to his feet. 'I'm sorry, mate. I almost had a heart attack myself, when I arrived. Took me a couple of seconds to realize it wasn't her.'

Lockyer tried to focus, to move or speak.

'Mike . . . are you all right?'

The iron clamp crushing his heart suddenly released its grip. He swayed as his senses rushed back to him. ' . . . I'm fine. It isn't . . . it isn't her,' he said, touching the chain around his neck, rolling the ring back and forth beneath his shirt.

'No, it isn't. I'm sorry, I handled that badly. I wasn't sure what to say,' Dave said with a shake of his head.

'It's fine, just knocked me off for a second, I'm fine . . . what else have you got for me?'

He tried to listen to Dave's preliminary report but all he could think about was Megan. All he could see was her face.

# 3

*23 January – Thursday*

Sarah crossed the road and walked onto Peckham Rye, Antonia close behind her dragging a less than willing terrier. There were three joggers on the opposite side of the park but other than that they were the only ones braving the cold weather. That was good.

Cars queued at the temporary traffic lights at the bottom of the park, their cold engines sending white clouds into the air. She found the normality of it almost comforting. People still went to work, still effered and blinded when they missed the lights. Everything carried on as before. Only she had changed. ‘So, whose dog is it?’ she asked.

‘Sally’s. Well, her friend’s, actually. She’s dog-sitting. He’s sweet, really, just a little hyper,’ Toni said, tugging on the dog’s lead as it struggled to go back the way they had come. ‘Monty . . . stop it,’ Toni said. Monty sniffed the air, looked up at them both and then resumed his game of tug of war.

‘And why are you walking him?’ Sarah asked, brushing her hair out of her face. It was cold but the sun had pushed through the clouds and she could do with the colour.



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‘No reason, really . . . I just thought it would give us a good reason to get out of the house,’ Toni said, with a smile.

Sarah should have known the dog walk was just a ploy to drag her out of her flat. Toni had tried everything in the past week, suggesting cinema trips, shopping, dinner out. Sarah had refused them all with the same excuse. She was tired and just needed some rest. It was true, in a way, but it wasn’t the real reason she didn’t want to go out. ‘You mean, get *me* out of the house,’ she said, returning Toni’s innocent smile.

‘It’s only a walk, Sarah. We can go back if you’d like?’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Sarah said, glancing behind her. ‘I’m out now. The fresh air will do me good.’ She gave Toni a shove on the arm. What were friends for, if not forcing you to do something you didn’t want to do, for your own good?

They walked arm in arm as they entered the manicured section of the park. Winter had removed all the warmth and colour. The lush green hideaway that had been created last spring was now bare wooded arches, dead leaves turning to mulch in the flower beds. She couldn’t wait for the weather to change. The dark nights, the cold. She hated it. It only made things seem more bleak.

‘William Blake saw visions here,’ Toni said, gesticulating around her at the dormant garden.

‘Really?’ Sarah replied, with no interest.

‘Yes, he did, trees filled with angels . . . imagine that? Angels,’ she said, squeezing Sarah’s arm.

She didn’t know how to respond. It didn’t feel like a place filled with anything even close to ethereal, but it was sweet of Toni to try to fill the silence between them.

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‘They kept Italian POWs here during the Second World War, too,’ said Toni, raising her eyebrows.

‘Fascinating,’ Sarah teased, relieved to feel a natural smile spreading across her face.

‘Someone has to educate you, *bella*,’ Toni said, giving Sarah a friendly shove. ‘So, how’s work?’ she asked in a sing-song voice, pulling the dog back onto the brick path, its paws already caked in mud.

Sarah’s smile vanished as she stopped walking and turned in a circle. ‘Oh, you know, same old, same old. I’ve got a job up in the City on Saturday. It’s an easy job. Head shots for a management team.’

‘That’s good, good that you’re still . . .’ Toni’s words were drowned out as Monty started to bark.

Sarah looked into the crush of pine trees that had been pinned and forced into an archway ahead of them. She heard a rustling and stepped back. The dog yelped as her heel connected with one of its paws. ‘There’s a good reason I don’t have pets,’ she said, hoping she didn’t look as on edge as she felt. She watched as Toni bent down and petted the little terrier, talking to him quietly in Italian. Sarah let the words soothe her but the peace didn’t last. A squirrel darted out of the line of trees, disappearing into the undergrowth. The dog started to bark again, pulling at the lead to escape. ‘Are we done yet?’ she asked, looking back. She could just see the end of her road. She wanted to be home, to close the door and put another day behind her.

‘It’s not good, Sarah. You can’t keep doing this,’ Toni said. ‘Why don’t you come and stay with me, just until this thing blows over?’

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She wanted to ask how Toni knew it would blow over. Things were getting worse, not better. And there was no one to help her. 'I can't, not right now,' she said, not trusting herself to look up. 'I've got a couple of possible jobs that I need to confirm. I only heard about them this morning. Besides, I'm fine, there's no need.' This time she took a deep breath, tipped her chin up and looked across at Toni who was shaking her head. 'I'm fine, really.' She forced a smile but it was obvious Toni didn't believe her. 'Thanks for getting me out of the house. It's helped, honestly,' she said, reaching down and giving Toni's hand a squeeze.

They walked back to her flat in silence, the dog's sniffing the only sound interrupting Sarah's thoughts. Would he call tonight? She closed her eyes and shook her head. Of course he would.

# 4

*23 January – Thursday*

Lockyer pushed against his eyelids with the tips of his fingers, but the image of the victim's bare feet and Megan's face refused to shift.

'Sir?'

He opened one eye and saw Jane standing in the doorway to his office. 'Jane. Perfect timing. As always.' The overhead spotlights were too bright. His head was thumping. He abandoned his attempt to open both eyes and maintained a lopsided view of his DS.

'I just wanted to report in and check you were . . . all right?' Her eyebrows disappeared beneath a severe black fringe: a new style that reminded him of a Lego man toy. The comparison suited both her petite frame and her demeanour. He had worked with Jane for years, watched her progress through the ranks, chosen her for his senior DS, and from his experience she was always immaculate, well presented, punctual, efficient; in essence the perfect copper. He was yet to find any faults. That couldn't be normal, surely? As the thought entered his head he caught sight of his own

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reflection in his computer screen. His dark hair was unbrushed and his olive skin was hidden beneath a day or two's stubble. Handsomely dishevelled? Possibly. He looked down. His shirt was buttoned up wrong. No. Just dishevelled.

'I'm fine, Jane.' He stood and walked over to his much-prized window, adjusting his shirt. They had moved him into this office when he had taken over as lead DI for Lewisham's MIT, Murder Investigation Team, part of the HSCC, the Homicide and Serious Crime Command. Neither title was used much, by him or his team. He was running the 'murder squad', plain and simple. Other branches in Hendon, Barnes, Belgravia and Barking dealt with north, south and central London, but the east and south-east were his domain. As he pushed back the vertical blinds to look out at the grey morning, his nose was assaulted by the smell of exhaust fumes and fried food drifting through his open window. He took a step back, watching as the human traffic of Lewisham collided, funnelled into a narrow pedestrian walkway. It was the fourth time the council had dug up this particular eight-foot-square section of the High Street. 'That is to say . . . I'm fine, considering I am dealing with three murdered girls, I've been up since four and listening to that jack-hammer since eight.' His voice echoed in his ears, trying to compete with the small boulders that were smashing against each other inside his skull. What he really wanted to do was drive the four miles home, close the shutters on his floor-to-ceiling Georgian windows, stretch out on his new sofa and go to sleep. The sofa had been delivered over a week ago and he still hadn't managed to sit in it for more than five minutes.

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'I spoke to Dave. He told me about this morning, sir,' Jane said, interrupting his thoughts.

He glanced over his shoulder. Her concerned face was beginning to make sense. 'Dave shouldn't be telling anyone anything,' he said.

'Sorry, sir, Dave just thought . . . he thought someone on the team should know.'

He looked away and studied Jane's reflection in the glass. She looked up at the ceiling, down at the floor and then at both sides of his office. He hadn't seen her look this uncomfortable since that May Day bank holiday, four years ago. An ill-advised evening for sure but it had been Jane's facial expression the next morning, a combination of embarrassment and concern in her eyes, that had made Lockyer run. 'I don't want anyone else to hear about this. Is that clear?'

'Absolutely, sir. Dave's getting ready for the post. He'll call when he's good to go. Should be an hour and—' The jackhammer resumed and drowned out the rest of Jane's sentence. 'Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?'

'Jane. Enough. You sound like Clara, for God's sake. Close the door on your way out.' He took a deep breath and turned back to his desk. It still felt odd mentioning Clara.

An hour later, surrounded by white Formica and steel, Lockyer stood in the mortuary suite, looking down at Deborah Stevens' body. She looked so small, fragile. The skin over her cheeks was taut and colourless. A griping pain rippled across his stomach. He cocked his head to one side and looked into her milky eyes, still open, frozen in terror. There was no sign of the smiling girl from the photograph

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that was now attached to Debbie's file, given to him by her family. He leaned closer and whispered her name, 'Debbie,' then straightened and backed away from the table as Patrick, Dave's senior assistant, began laying out all of the instruments needed for the procedure.

'Did you see the bite mark?'

Lockyer turned to find Dave standing right next to him. 'What bite mark?' he asked, looking away, reluctant to look his friend in the eye.

Dave walked around to the other side of the table, pointed to Debbie's right shoulder and lifted a section of matted hair away from her pale face. 'Here . . . it's at the top of the trapezius muscle. I didn't see it in the prelim exam because it was hidden by the hairline.' Lockyer took a step forward and looked at the livid, purplish marks scattered over Debbie's neck. It looked like she had been attacked by a wild dog, not a man. He turned away, the image of the marks already burned into his memory. 'There isn't enough of an impression for dental recognition but Patrick has taken some deep tissue swabs and we might have some saliva.' Lockyer didn't respond. He couldn't. All he could see was Debbie's attacker, crouching over her, sinking his teeth into her like a vampire in the moonlight. 'OK . . . hard to please this morning, I see,' Dave said, walking to the end of the mortuary table. 'Would it make you happier if I said I had a fingerprint?'

He tore his mind away from the images in his head and finally looked at Dave. 'Fingerprint. How? The body was cleaned, wasn't it?' His voice rough, like flint on stone.

'He did . . . watered-down bleach, like the others. I guess he missed a spot,' Dave said with a shrug. 'It's a partial print,

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in blood. Right index finger. It's on the outside of the left thigh.' Dave held up his right hand to demonstrate the angle against Debbie's outstretched legs.

'I need that print,' Lockyer said.

'Already done. Patrick lifted it just before you came down. Your team are scanning it now,' Dave said. 'Who knows, maybe you'll have a suspect by the time we're done here.'

He looked down at Debbie, pushed his anger away and said a silent prayer that Dave was right. He resisted an urge to reach out, to touch her cheek, and without warning Megan's face pushed its way into his thoughts. His hand went automatically to the chain around his neck, the band of gold cool against his chest. He shook his head. Now wasn't the time. 'What about the drug?' he asked.

'It'll take a few days to get the toxicology report back but I think he used some kind of mild barbiturate.' Dave moved forward and gently lifted one of Debbie's arms. 'The defensive wounds here . . . and here, indicate she came to at some point but I doubt she was ever fully conscious,' he said, indicating several deep scratches on her hand and forearm. 'And he definitely used a knife to further subdue her,' he said. 'This is the puncture wound.'

'Can you check the others for any drug traces?' Lockyer asked, looking away from the welts on Debbie's arms and the small hole just beneath her ribs.

'Of course,' Dave said. 'We already have the blood work back on the first two victims but I haven't had time to look at it, what with this and the gang killing last week. I'll rush them through and get back to you. Now . . . if that's all . . . I think we're ready to begin.' Dave's voice had taken on a



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much softer tone. Respectful. He reached for a scalpel and paused like a conductor before a concert.

Lockyer watched Dave make the Y incision, constantly speaking into a Dictaphone, detailing every move he made, every cut. 'The outer chest cavity is clear, no evidence of trauma, oedema present but consistent with hypostasis. Patrick, please open the chest cavity.' Lockyer looked away. He wasn't squeamish but there were some things he just didn't need to see, and the removal of the chest plate was one of them.

'I am making my incision and opening the pericardial sac . . . heart clean, very little plaque build-up, consistent with the victim's age.' Dave's scalpel moved in a blur. 'I am taking blood from the inferior vena cava . . . Patrick.' Patrick stepped forward, placing a syringe into Dave's gloved hand. As Dave dissected the lungs he muttered, 'Smoker, not heavy.'

Bile rushed into Lockyer's mouth. Megan smoked. He could still hear Dave's voice but it was as if he was talking underwater, his words muted. '. . . kidneys, clean . . . liver, clean . . . pancreas . . . stomach, very little to see here. She hadn't eaten in six hours, at least . . .' He swallowed and forced himself to focus. '. . . we'll move on to the reproductive system now,' Dave said, his blurred shape taking a step back, sidestepping before approaching the table again. A freezing hand snaked its way up Lockyer's body, touching his thighs, his stomach and the base of his spine. He hung his head and let out a long breath.

'Mike?' He could hear Dave's voice but it sounded far away. 'Lockyer!' Dave's harsh shout brought him back. He stood straight, blinking rapidly. Dave and his team were all staring at him. 'Are you all right?'

He cleared his throat. '. . . I'm fine,' he said, covering his

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face with his hands as he coughed. 'I'm sorry about that . . .' He fumbled for something to say, anything to explain his bizarre behaviour. 'I'm fine. Must be something I ate.' He waited for what felt like hours as David and Patrick continued to stare at him.

'Right,' Dave said, breaking the silence. 'Let's continue, shall we?'

He tried to ignore the look of concern on his friend's face, dropping his eyes to the floor as Dave made the incision to open up Debbie's reproductive cavity. He felt furious with himself. When he told Jane earlier that he was fine, that he didn't need to talk about this morning, about Megan, he had meant it. So why was his body going into some kind of meltdown?

'We've got something here,' Dave said, the grey bags under his eyes illuminated by the mortuary light as he looked up. 'She's had a D&C . . . very recently . . . last few days, I'd say, either the result of an incomplete miscarriage or a first trimester abortion.' Dave's shrug told Lockyer which his friend thought more likely.

'Jesus,' Lockyer said, shaking his head. 'Are we done?' he asked, watching as Patrick began positioning Debbie's head for the brain exam. He could do without seeing them remove a section of her head. He wanted out of this room.

'You are,' Dave said. 'We'll finish up here and I'll get my full report to you as soon as I can.'

'Right. Thanks,' he said, already turning to leave.

'Hey, buddy, you might want to get something for that stomach of yours,' Dave said. 'You look like shit.'

'Thank you, David,' he replied, without bothering to turn around.

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Lockyer sat down at his desk as the office door clicked shut. He had been making lists in his head on the way back from the mortuary suite. Things he had to do, things he wanted Jane and his DSs to get started on and things for the DCs to be getting on with, but all he kept seeing was Megan's face. He needed to make the call. He pressed speed-dial three on his mobile, inhaled, held the breath and waited. It was on the fifth ring that she answered.

'Hello, Megan speaking.'

'Hello, Megan speaking. This is your father speaking.'

# 5

*23 January – Thursday*

Sarah turned out the main light and closed her bedroom door, her right eye twitching as the click of the latch echoed around the room. Her body, this flat, her life: nothing felt solid. Everything had been replaced with shadows, paper-thin imitations that threatened to blow apart at any moment, disintegrating into a million pieces. The floorboards creaked as she padded over to the window. Her blind was already down, so, careful not to touch it, she peered around the edge and looked out at her little strip of garden: roaming weeds, strangled flowers and light clumps of dead grass where her lawn had failed to grow.

She stepped back. He couldn't see her. She knew that. Her flat was on the first floor and the only thing that overlooked the back of the house was the Bredinghurst School playground. The fence separating her from the school was twenty feet high, covered in ivy. She sighed and sat down on the edge of her bed, her legs suddenly too weak to hold her. How many hours had she wasted trying to convince herself that he wasn't outside, that he couldn't see her, that he didn't exist?

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She pulled up the hood of her sweatshirt. A low thud made her freeze. She held her breath and waited, straining her ears to identify the origin of the sound. Her heart hammered in her chest. As her body began to shake she heard three more thuds and the sound of rushing water. It was her central heating, just water and pipes. She rocked back and forth, dizzy as the adrenalin that had surged through her body just seconds ago abandoned her.

She turned and looked over at her alarm clock. It was almost midnight. He hadn't called tonight, not yet. For what felt like the hundredth time Sarah thought about calling Toni, but what would that achieve? She already knew what Toni would say. 'Call the police. I'll come over. You shouldn't be by yourself.' No. She wouldn't do that. If he called, he called. There was nothing Toni could do about it and there was nothing the police would do about it. Sarah was on her own. Her socks crackled against the sheet as she climbed into bed. She covered her bedside lamp with a pashmina. It made the room just dark enough. She picked up her notebook from the nightstand and opened it, unable to focus on the scribbled dates and times that swam on the pages. Tonight's entry was barely legible. It looked more like a scream on a page than actual words. Her arm brushed against the video camera where it nestled next to her. She shouldn't watch it again. It would only make things worse.

The calls had started six months ago, although the ache in her bones made it feel much longer. At first she had answered her phone without fear: 'Hello . . . hellooooo.' Why wouldn't she? Two months had gone by, dozens of the phantom calls and still the penny hadn't dropped. Even as

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fear started to take hold, she had convinced herself that it was a wrong number, a cold call from Abu Dhabi about Internet providers, or a friend on holiday, drunk and oblivious to the time difference. But then it changed. It was a Tuesday night in October. She had flopped into bed after a heavy vino session with Toni. When her phone rang she had answered it. She was too tired, too drunk to talk, so she just listened. That was when he had said her name: 'Sarah.' A man's voice. Not loud, not questioning. Just her name carried on an outward breath and then nothing. Nothing but his breathing. That was the night she had realized it wasn't a wrong number and it never had been. The presence she had sensed, the weird incidents she'd shrugged off, for months, had been him. She had called Peckham Police Station the next day and had recounted her story to four different officers before being put through to a sergeant who was either very old, very jaded or both. She told him everything: the phone calls, the phantom knocks on her door, the stuff with her car and, most importantly, the presence she had felt but not believed until that one call had brought everything into focus. What had the sergeant done? Nothing. He had patronized her, saying, 'My advice at this stage, Miss Grainger, would be to alter your routine. Small changes often result in an end to this kind of nuisance.' He had used words like 'nuisance', 'harassment' and 'harmless' as if he were reading them from a cheat sheet. He never said 'stalker'. Sarah had, she kept on saying it, but he had swerved and returned to his safe words. 'Ninety per cent of these nuisance cases turn out to be nothing. An old boyfriend, perhaps, or someone who would like to be a boyfriend. You are doing the right thing, Miss

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Grainger. As long as you show him no further encouragement, he will get bored.'

She sat up and threw her duvet off, unable to stand the weight pressing down on her. How had she encouraged him, exactly? By answering her phone? Was that seen as a come-on these days? She shook her head and stared at the bedroom door. The sergeant had even told her not to change her number. How would they prove anything if there wasn't a clear log of all the calls she had received? 'Keep a journal of further events, if there are any, but do call us at any time if you are concerned. I assure you, Miss Grainger, we take these cases very seriously.'

'What a load of crap,' she said to the empty room. The police didn't care. Whenever she called to speak to them, to tell them things were getting worse, to tell them she couldn't take any more, the answer was always the same. 'Officer Rayner will call you right back, Miss Grainger,' but he never did.

Her eyes were again drawn to the video camera lying next to her. She picked it up as if it was coated in acid and opened the screen, her hands already beginning to shake. As she pressed play, she shrank back into her pillows. She watched as her street flickered to life on the display in front of her. Parked cars lined the pavements. Lights shone out from her neighbours' houses. The picture zoomed in. A dark car. A dark figure sitting, motionless. She wasn't even sure what kind of car it was. Maybe a Honda, like her brother's? She couldn't see the registration. The man inside didn't move; his shape could almost be a mannequin. The screen went black. That was it.

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When the man in the car had actually moved Sarah had dropped the camera and run through to the kitchen, gasping for air. She had crawled on her hands and knees to retrieve it an hour later when she was calm enough. He had made her crawl in her own home and cower under her own windowsill.

She pulled her duvet up around her chin and turned onto her side, staring at her white wall. She reached out a cold hand and let it hover over the switch on the bedside lamp. If he was outside, watching, he would know that she was in her bedroom. Her hand retreated under the covers. She was so thirsty but knew she couldn't make it to the kitchen. Now she had closed herself in, her bedroom door was both a comfort and a terror.

Unable to sleep, Sarah tossed and turned, watching the red numbers projected by her alarm clock onto the ceiling, counting the hours. Her mind drifted, sleep sucking her under for just a moment until her stomach lurched, forcing her eyes open, dragging her back to consciousness.

A ringing sound floated along her senses. As her mind moved in slow motion towards understanding, the ringing became louder, deafening. She sat up, staring. On the bedside table her mobile vibrated, the blue light from her phone illuminating the room. She edged towards the noise, keeping the covers tight around her. For a fleeting second she imagined seeing Toni's name or even her mother's. The face of her phone came into view. 'Call' was all the screen told her. She could answer. She wouldn't, but she could. It was 1 a.m. The phone stopped and after ten seconds the display went



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black. She tunnelled back into the centre of her bed, the duvet covering her completely. Her breathing slowed. The diary. 'Damn it,' she said as she stuck her head and one arm out of the warmth and grabbed the notebook and pen. She had made more notes in this last week than she had in the past four months. She looked at the time and scribbled: '1 a.m. call. Not answered. No message.' She closed the book, pushed it back onto the table, and once again retreated under her duvet, groggy with restless sleep. She tucked herself into a ball and wrapped her arms around her legs. She could feel her body giving in, exhaustion dragging her under.

Then she was dreaming about a series of doors. She was trying to find her room in a vast hotel. She recognized the concierge but she couldn't ask him where room 1497 was. None of the doors would open. Each time she turned a brass handle it buzzed. They must be locked. Sarah desperately looked at the white corridor in front of her, hoping for a sign, an arrow she could follow. She tried another door. This time a buzzing and ringing sounded with each twist of the doorknob. She opened her eyes. A blue light danced over her ceiling. Without moving she reached over and picked up her phone, bringing it close to her face. 'Call' the screen said. She looked up at the time projected in red on her ceiling. It was 2 a.m. She pushed the phone beneath her pillow and waited for the ringing to stop. With automatic movements she picked up the notebook and pen and wrote down the entry. She lay back on the bed, her brain telling her she was dreaming. She was still in the hotel. Sarah closed her eyes and continued her search for room 1497.

At 3 a.m. she was awake, staring at the ceiling. She had

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been considering turning her phone off for the past thirty-four minutes, but then how would she log the calls? And what would be the point anyway? He would still be calling but without the ringing she wouldn't know. He would be sneaking into her bedroom without her knowledge and she couldn't bear the thought of that. When the phone jumped into life next to her she didn't even flinch. Her fear had been replaced with a kind of numb acceptance. The red numbers on her ceiling and the blue lights danced together now.

At 4 a.m. she started laughing. Deep in her stomach she felt tremors that ran haphazardly through her body as though she was having a fit. 'Come on,' she said to the gloom. 'Come on, then.' Almost immediately he answered her. The ringing, the buzzing, the lights. It was a party in her room at 4 a.m.

An hour later she lay looking at a hairline crack that ran the length of her bedroom wall. She counted the calls off in her head again, just to check she hadn't imagined them. Four calls, on the hour, every hour since 1 a.m.. 5 a.m. flickered red on the ceiling. Had he finally given up? She tensed her aching muscles and said a silent prayer that he had, but before she could finish the thought her mobile started to ring, buzzing next to her. She couldn't bring herself even to touch the phone any more. She rested on one elbow and looked at the screen. Her hands itched as she wrestled for the fifth time with whether to answer. He wanted her to answer. More than anything he wanted her to give in to him. The ringing stopped.

She had coped with a fortnightly call but every night this week and then five times last night – it was too much. The mobile beeped to let her know the caller had left a voicemail. She picked up her phone and threw it at the wall. It bounced

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and landed at the foot of her bed. Unharmed, indestructible. She looked over at her bedroom door, at the pale light surrounding it. She couldn't wait any longer. She threw back the duvet and dragged herself out of bed.

In the bathroom she splashed cold water on her face and blinked at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyelids were swollen. She tipped the contents of her make-up bag into the sink. The mirror had a crack running across the bottom left-hand corner where she had screwed it on too tight. The 'one coat' azure paint she had chosen looked tatty, with bits of the previous pink showing through where her brush strokes had been too quick. A film of dust and condensation clung to the cistern of the toilet. The tiles beneath her feet were coming loose, leaving tiny sharp corners that snagged her feet. She put her hands on either side of the basin, closing her fingers around the porcelain. Her reflection blurred at the edges but her eyes were on fire. Hers were the eyes of a hunted animal. She had nothing left to hold on to but her fear.