

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a red dress, is submerged in water. She is holding a thin, light-colored object, possibly a pen or a small tool, in her right hand. The water is clear, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the woman's face and the texture of the water.

A GRIPPING SERIAL
KILLER THRILLER

DARK WATER

ROBERT BRYNDZA
A DETECTIVE ERIKA FOSTER NOVEL

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Bookouture

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UNTITLED

Dark Water
(DCI Erika Foster Book 3)
Robert Bryndza

JULY 2016 DRAFT

PROLOGUE

It was a cold night in late autumn when they dumped the body in the disused quarry. They knew that it was an isolated spot, and that the water was very deep.

What they didn't know is that they were being watched.

The two of them arrived under darkness, just after three o'clock in the morning. They drove from the houses at the edge of the village, over the empty patch of gravel where the walkers parked their cars, and onto the vast common. They kept the headlights off, and bumped and lurched across the rough ground, joining a footpath, which was soon shrouded on either side by banks of trees. The darkness was thick and clammy, and the only light came over the tops of the trees.

However, nothing about the journey felt stealthy. The car engine seemed to roar out, the suspension groaned as it lurched from side to side. They slowed to a stop as the trees parted, and the water filled quarry came into sight.

What they didn't know was that a man lived by the quarry. He squatted in an old abandoned cottage, which had almost been reclaimed by the undergrowth. He wanted nothing more than to live a peaceful life. He was outside staring up at the sky and marvelling at its beauty when the car

appeared over the ridge and came to a halt. He moved behind a bank of undergrowth and watched, warily. Several times he had chased away local kids, and junkies too.

The moon briefly broke through the clouds as two figures emerged from the car. They took something large from the back, and carried it towards the rowing boat by the water. The first climbed in, and as the second passed the long package into the boat, there was something about the way it bent and flopped that made him realise with horror that it was a body.

The soft splashes of the oars carried across the water. He put a hand to his mouth. He knew he should turn away, but he couldn't. The splashing oars ceased when the boat reached the middle. A sliver of moon appeared again through a gap in the clouds, illuminating the ripples spreading out from the boat.

He held his breath, as he heard a low rhythmic murmur come from the two figures, almost like a prayer being recited. The boat lurched as they stood, one of them nearly went over the edge. When they were steady, they lifted the package and with a splash and a rattle of chains they tipped it over the edge. The moon sailed out from behind its cloud, shining a bright light on the boat, and the spot where the package had been dumped, the ripples spreading violently outwards.

He also saw the two people in the boat, and saw their faces, recognised who they were.

The man exhaled. He'd been holding his breath. His hands shook. He didn't want trouble, spent his whole life trying to avoid trouble. A chill breeze stirred up some dry leaves at his feet and he felt a sharp itching in his nose. Before he could do anything he sneezed loudly, it echoed across the water. In the boat their heads snapped up, and began to twist and search the banks. He turned to run, tripped on the root of a tree and fell to the ground knocking the wind out of his chest.

BENEATH THE WATER in the disused quarry it was still, cold, and very dark. The body sank rapidly, pulled by the weights, down, down, down, finally coming to rest with a nudge in the soft freezing mud.

She would lie still and undisturbed for many years, almost at peace. But above her, on dry land, the nightmare was only just beginning.

FRIDAY 28TH OCTOBER 2016

DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR ERIKA FOSTER crossed her arms over the bulky life jacket against the icy wind, wishing she'd worn a thicker coat. The small inflatable MET Police Marine Recovery boat churned across the water of the large quarry, dragging behind it a small transponder, scanning the bed deep below.

'Water depth is twenty-three point seven meters,' said Sergeant Lorna Crozier, the Dive Supervisor. She was hunched over a small screen at the front of the boat, where the results of the sonar were beamed back and displayed in inky purple shades, blooming across the screen like a bruise.

'So, it's going to be tough to salvage what we're looking for?' asked Erika, noting her tone.

Lorna nodded. 'Anything beyond thirty metres is a tough. My divers can only stay down for short periods. The average pond or canal is a couple of meters deep. Even at high tide the Thames at its deepest is ten to twelve meters.'

‘There could be anything down there,’ said Detective Sergeant John McGorry, who was squashed in the small plastic seat beside Erika.

‘Are you trying to sit on my lap?’ she snapped as he leaned across her to peer over the edge.

‘Sorry, Boss,’ he grinned shifting across the seat. ‘I saw this show on the Discovery Channel. Only 5% of the ocean floor is mapped. The ocean occupies 70% of the Earth's surface, that leaves 65% of the Earth, excluding dry land, *unexplored...*’

Erika followed his youthful gaze across the rippling surface of the water. The visibility can't have been more than a couple of feet before it became a swirl of dark shadows.

The disused quarry sat at the northern tip of Hayes common, on the outskirts of South London. At the waters edge twenty meters away, clumps of dead reeds swayed in the wind. A large support lorry was parked on the grassy bank, and beside it the small support team were preparing the diving gear. Their orange lifejackets were the only dots of colour on the dingy autumn afternoon. Behind them, gorse and heather stretched away with a mix of greys and browns, and a clump of trees in the far distance were bare. A line of new-build houses backed onto the banks on the opposite side of the quarry, peeping over a long row of fence panels.

The boat reached the end of the quarry and slowed.

‘Turning about,’ said PC Barker a young male officer sat at the rudder of the outboard motor. He performed a sharp turn so they could double back and cross the length of the water for the sixth time.

‘Do you think, some fish or eel down deep could have grown to like super proportions?’ asked John, turning to Lorna, his eyes still shining with enthusiasm.

‘I've seen some pretty big fresh water Crayfish when I've been diving. Although this quarry isn't a tributary, so whatever is down there would have to have been introduced,’ replied Lorna, one eye on the screen.

‘I grew up in St Mary Cray, and there was a pet shop near us that, apparently, sold baby crocodiles...’ John’s voice tailed off and he looked back at them raising an eyebrow. He was always upbeat and chatty, which Erika could just about cope with. Although, she dreaded working the early shift with him.

‘We’re not looking for a crocodile. We’re looking for ten kilos of heroin, packed into a waterproof container,’ snapped Erika. John looked back at her and nodded.

‘Sorry, Boss.’

She checked her watch. It was coming up to three thirty.

‘What’s that worth on the street, ten kilos?’ asked PC Barker, from his spot by the rudder.

‘Four million pounds.’

He whistled, ‘I take it, the container was dropped in deliberately?’

Erika nodded. ‘The guy we’ve got in custody was waiting for things to quieten down, before he came back for it...’

She didn’t add that they could only hold him in custody for another eight hours.

‘Did he really think he’d get it back? We’re an experienced dive team, and we’re going to find this a tough one to salvage,’ said Lorna.

‘With four million on the line, yes, I think he was going to come back for it,’ replied Erika. ‘We’re hoping to lift his prints off the plastic layers inside.’

‘Hang on. This could be something, kill the motor,’ said Lorna leaning closer into the tiny screen where a small shape glowed black amongst a swirl of purple hues. PC Barker switched off the outboard motor and the silence rang out, replaced by a swish of water as the boat slowed. He got up and joined her at the screen.

‘We’re scanning an area of four meters each side of the boat,’ said Lorna her small hand moving over a blob on the screen.

‘So the scale is correct,’ agreed Barker.

‘You think that’s it?’ asked Erika. Hope rising in her chest.

‘Could be,’ said Lorna. ‘Could be an old fridge. We won’t know for sure till we’re down there.’

‘Do you dive too?’ Erika asked her, trying to stay positive.

‘Yeah. We take it in turns. I was on a dive yesterday, and we have to have rest periods.’

‘Where were you yesterday?’ asked John.

‘Rotherhithe. We had to recover a body from the lake at the nature reserve. Suicide.’

‘Whoa. It must add a whole new level of freakiness, finding a body deep underwater?’

Lorna nodded, ‘I found him, stood up on the bottom. Ten feet down. I was searching in zero visibility and suddenly my hands close around a pair of ankles, and I feel up, and there’s the legs.’

‘Jeepers. Stood up, underwater?’ Said John.

‘It does happen, something to do with the composition of the gas in the body and the progress of decay.’

‘It must be fascinating. I’ve only been in the force for a couple of years, this is my first time with a dive team,’ said John.

‘We find tons of weird shit. The worst is when you find a bag of puppies,’ said PC Barker.

‘Bastards. I’ve been a copper for twenty-five years, and I still learn something new everyday about how sick people can be,’ said Erika

They turned to her for a moment, mentally working out how old she was.

‘So, what about this anomaly? How quick can you get down there and bring it up?’ asked Erika indicating the screen.

‘I think we’ll mark it up with a buoy, and take another pass on it,’ replied Lorna, moving to the side of the boat and preparing a small orange marker buoy with a weighted line. She dropped the weight over the edge, and it quickly vanished into the deep, dark water, the line following, rapidly

spooling over the edge. They left the marker floating as PC Barker fired up the outboard motor, and they moved off across the water.

AN HOUR later they had covered the surface of the quarry, and identified three possible anomalies. Erika and John had come ashore to warm up. The late October day was now fading fast as they huddled outside the dive lorry with Styrofoam cups of tea. On the bank, Lorna held one end of a weighted down rope, leading along the bed of the quarry toward the first marker buoy where an officer sat in the boat, holding the other end. Two divers were down on the bottom, searching along the line toward each other. Erika could hear the tinny sound of their voices as they communicated through the radios in their diving masks with the comms team by the shore.

Erika took a deep inhale on her e-cigarette, the LED light at the end glowing red, she exhaled a puff of white vapour.

It was three months since she'd been transferred to Bromley South Station, and she was still trying to find her place and fit in with her new team. It was only a few miles from her old borough of Lewisham in South London, but she was becoming used to the vast difference a few miles can make between the outskirts of London and the edge of the county of Kent. She looked over at McGorry who was twenty yards away, talking on his phone. It looked like a personal call, he was grinning as he chatted. He looked over and she looked away. A moment later he finished the call, and came over.

'You think they're going to find it?'

'God I hope so. The thought of having to release that little bastard.'

The little bastard in question was Jason Tyler, who had risen rapidly to control a drug dealing network in South London and the Kent borders.

John paused.

'Boss?'

'Yeah?'

‘That was my girlfriend, Monica on the phone. She, we wanted me to invite you over for dinner.’

Erika turned to him, surprised.

‘What?’ she said, a little too sharply.

‘You’re my new boss and I’ve told her lots about you... She’d love to make you her lasagna. It’s really good. And I’m not just saying that cos she’s my girlfriend. It really is...’ his voice tailed off as he looked eagerly up at Erika.

‘John, we’re right in the middle of a big case...’

‘I didn’t mean tonight. Some other day.’

‘You don’t have to do that, John.’

‘I’d like to. And if there were anyone else you’d like to invite, that’s cool. Is there a Mr Foster?’

Erika had spent the last couple of years hearing herself gossiped about in the force, so she was surprised that John didn’t know.

‘There’s no Mr Foster. There was, but he, my husband’s dead.’

John’s look of surprise was cut off by a shout that went up from the support team at the water’s edge. They hurried over to where Lorna was crouched down at the small comms unit, speaking to one of the divers on the bottom. The tinny voice cut through the cold air.

‘... It’s a hard plastic shell casing, around four feet square... It’s packed in under the mud... ’ There was interference, which Erika realised were bubbles from the divers’ respirator. ‘I’ll need help if we’re going to pull it out...’

She pressed her radio, ‘Okay, I’m sending Paul and Clive in with the winch, over... This could be it, ‘ she added looking up at Erika.

THE TEMPERATURE PLUMMETED by the water as darkness fell. Erika and John paced up and down within the arc of light spilling out of the support vehicles.

The trees behind them had vanished in the darkness that seemed to press down on them all.

One of the divers, slick in his dry suits finally emerged up the steep banks of the quarry carrying what looked like a large moulded plastic suitcase streaked in mud. Erika moved over to join the group helping him up and onto dry land, the box was placed on the ground, a torch was trained on it. There were two padlocked latches either side of the carry handle.

‘There’s a pressure equalisation valve on the case,’ said Erika indicating a mud - covered button underneath the handle. John took a pair of long handled metal cutters from one of the dive team, and deftly clipped both locks. He stood back.

‘Do you want to do the honours, Boss?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I do,’ said Erika pulling on a pair of latex gloves. She crouched down in front of the plastic case and gently turned the pressure valve, which was followed by a hissing noise. She then unclipped both latches and pulled up the lid. Inside, packed neatly in long rows, were bags each filled with the rose-grey coloured powder.

‘Got you,’ said Erika. She stood up and John raised his hand. Despite herself she high-fived him. ‘We’ve got him!’

‘Jeez, Boss, now I know what four million pounds looks like... It’s horrific, but I can’t stop looking,’ said John turning back at the contents of the case.

‘Thank you, all of you,’ said Erika, turning to the silent faces that stood around in a small semi circle, staring in at the case full of drugs. John was right; it was both captivating and horrific to see that much in one place. It had an almost dangerous power to it. A crash of interference came through the comms unit from one of the divers still working out by the support boat, Lorna she went over and started talking to the diver over the radio.

‘Okay, John, put in a call to control. We need this moved securely to the nick, make sure the fingerprint team are ready to pull this apart the moment

we get back. We're not taking our eyes off it until it's safely locked up, you understand?'

'Yes, Boss.'

'And get one of the large evidence bags from the car.'

John went off as Erika pulled out her iPhone and took some photos of the open case, the flash briefly illuminating the darkness on the common. She closed the case again, locking the latches.

'DCI Foster,' said Lorna coming over from where she'd been talking on the comms unit. 'One of our divers has just been doing a sweep of the area where we found the case, and he's found something else which, perhaps you should see...'

A FEW MINUTES LATER, another diver emerged from the water with something dark and misshapen cradled in his arms. He brought it over to the floodlit area of ground, where they saw it was a mud-streaked bundle of plastic entwined in rusty chains, which were looped through and weighed down by what looked like exercise weights.

No one in the team said anything. It was no more than five feet long, misshapen, and had folded over on itself. The plastic was old and brittle and seemed bleached of colour.

'It was found four feet away from the plastic case, partially submerged in silt on the quarry bed,' said Lorna. It looked as if it had been down there for longer than the past few months. As the diver placed it on the floor, the weights clinked and jangled.

'I need the bolt cutters,' said Erika, breaking the silence. John pulled on a fresh pair of latex gloves, and gently set to work, clipping the rusty chains, which were thin but woven over and under several times. The plastic was so brittle it had become rigid, so it crackled as the chains were unwound, and water began to seep out onto the grass from inside. Erika pulled on a fresh

pair of latex gloves and began to help John as they slowly worked unfolding the plastic.

They were silent apart from the hum of a generator, and despite the cold, Erika realised she was sweating. The plastic was folded repeatedly and rolled over, and as they unwrapped the layers, she thought whatever was inside was small. It smelt only of pond water, stale and a little unpleasant, which set alarm bells off in her mind.

Then they reached the last fold in the plastic, and opened it out with a crackle. Inside lay a small skeleton, a jumble of pieces, amongst a layer of fine silt. Little remained of its clothes, and scraps of brown material clung to a piece of ribcage. Below it was a small thin belt with a rusted buckle looped around the spinal cord, still attached to the pelvis. The skull was loose, and nestled in a curved pile of ribs. A few murky wisps of hair remained attached to the top of the skull.

‘Oh my god,’ said Lorna.

‘It’s very small... It looks like a child’s skeleton,’ said Erika softly. John stood and moved quickly away, out of the darkness to the edge of the quarry, where he was violently sick.

The banks of Hayes Quarry had been chaotic after they found the human remains. It had started to rain heavily. Lorna had withdrawn her team from the water; they had all exceeded their dive time, and had to rest up so the levels of nitrogen in their blood could level out. Backup officers were called. Valuable time passed as statements were taken and the small remains were photographed by an official CSI.

As the pathologists van pulled away with the small skeleton zipped up in a black body bag, Erika couldn't shake off what she'd seen. The empty staring eye sockets of the small skull. A thin belt with a rusty buckle looped around the spinal column, and the wisps of long hair still attached to the skull, coarse and tangled by the water. She'd felt a pang of regret she was no longer in her old job on the Murder Investigation Team at Lewisham Row. She was now working in conjunction with The Projects Team, fighting organised crime. It would be another officers job to find out how the small skeleton ended up thirty feet down, in the freezing blackness.

It was still raining hard when Erika climbed into the driver's seat of her car. It hammered down on the roof, and the blue light from the surrounding squad cars and dive lorry caught in the raindrops on the windscreen. She ran her hands through her wet hair and turned to John.

‘Are you alright?’

‘Sorry, Boss. I don’t know why I... I’ve seen *two* dead bodies before. There wasn’t even any blood.’

‘It’s okay.’ Erika started the engine as the two backup vehicles and the one escorting the case of heroin pulled away. She put the car in gear and followed. They rode in silence as the convoy’s headlights illuminated the dense woodland, rolling past on both sides of the gravel track.

‘Looking on the bright side, we found the case, where she said it would be,’ said John.

‘We need fingerprints.’

‘Theresa Grove said she was there when he packed that case with his bare hands...’

Erika was exhausted, but they still had a long night ahead of them. Jason Tyler’s girlfriend Theresa Grove had been persuaded to turn informant. If they found his prints, and the case went to trial, she would most probably have to go into hiding and then witness protection. If they didn’t find any prints then they would still have to move fast to keep Theresa and her two children safe.

They left the common, and drove through Hayes Village. Lights blazing in the windows of the supermarket, chip shop and the newsagent where a row of Halloween rubber masks hung limp in the window, all blank eyes and grotesque hooked noses.

Erika couldn’t seem to summon up any feelings of triumph. She’d spent several years heading up anti drug squads during her time in the force. The names seemed to change: Central Drug Unit, Drug and Organised Crime prevention, The Projects Team. All with their own snappy acronyms and mission statements, but the war on drugs would never be won. You take out one supplier, another one takes his place, filling the vacuum with even more skill and cunning. Jason Tyler had filled a vacuum, and in a short space of time it would happen again. Murderers, however were different, you could

catch them and lock them up. Sometimes if you were lucky you got to throw away the key.

The squad cars in front came to a halt at a set of traffic lights as commuters streamed out of the train station carrying umbrellas. The lights turned green but they couldn't move as the roundabout up ahead was clogged with two double decker buses. Rain clattered on the roof of the car.

'You asked earlier if I was married,' said Erika.

'Sorry, Boss. I just wanted to know if you'd like to bring anyone for dinner.'

'He was in the force. He died during a drugs raid, two and a half years ago.'

'Shit. I didn't know. I wouldn't have said anything... Sorry.'

'It's okay. Although, I thought everyone knew.'

'I'm not really into gossip. And you're still welcome to come for dinner. I meant it. Sarah's lasagna is really good.'

Erika grinned, 'Thank you. Maybe when this is over.'

'What about that skeleton, it's a little kid, isn't it?'

'Yeah... I know its tough, but you have to put that to the back of your mind, at least for the time being.'

John nodded. The buses moved off from the roundabout, and the traffic began to creep forward.

BROMLEY SOUTH POLICE STATION is a modern three-storey brick building at the bottom of Bromley High Street, opposite the train station, and a large Waitrose. On weekdays, the shops on the paved high street all shut their doors at six pm, and the last of the workers were hurrying under the awning of Bromley South Train Station, the torrential rain and the promise of the weekend to come hastening their rush. The first groups of Friday night drinkers were moving in the other direction, congregating under the station

awning and moving up the high street. There were young girls holding tiny jackets over their heads, to keep their even tinier dresses dry, and boys in shirts and smart trousers holding free copies of The Evening Standard. Erika turned into the slip road, which wound down to the underground car park, following the two squad cars, their lights still flashing, flanking the car carrying the heroin.

The ground floor of Bromley Station housed the uniform division, and the corridor was busy with officers arriving for the night shift, pensive and gloomy at the prospect of the night ahead, dealing with underage drinkers. Superintendent Yale met Erika, John, and the six uniform officers accompanying the case at the main staircase up to CID Division. He had a ruddy face, a shock of bristly red hair, and he always looked as if someone had stuffed him into his uniform, it was a size too small for his bulky frame.

‘Okay, Sir,’ said Erika.

‘Good work, Foster,’ he said, beaming at the case wrapped in the evidence bag. ‘I’ve got the fingerprint technicians waiting upstairs.’

‘The salvage didn’t go to plan, we found...’ started Erika.

‘Yes, human remains. Let’s hold off on talking about that. Any requirement for an investigation will be determined by the age of the bones. If they’re more than seventy years old we don’t have to investigate...’

‘Sir. The skeleton was wrapped in plastic sheeting.’

‘Yes, but we’ll have to rule out that it’s not medieval remains. There was a case a few years back, where a skeleton was found on a beach in the Isle of Wight. Police were looking to open a murder investigation and then carbon dating showed that it was 2,000 years old...’

‘Sir, they looked modern, it was a child...’ started Erika.

‘Erika, we’re at a crucial stage here, don’t lose focus.’

They reached the door to an office where a plain-clothes officer was waiting.

‘Ah, DI Crabbe. Here it is, let’s see if we can get some prints off this and

nail Jason Tyler!’ said Superintendent Yale. ‘Erika, you and John grab something to eat and warm up. We’ve got four hours and seventeen minutes,’ said Yale, pulling up his sleeve to check his watch buried in his hairy wrist. ‘So let’s get cracking.’

ERIKA AND JOHN came up to the large open plan office on the second floor and waited with a group of six other CID officers from her team, two women and four men. Four hundred and seventy-seven wrapped bags of heroin had to be separated and dusted for prints by the team of six fingerprint technicians.

They sat in silence as rain hammered against the windows. Erika paced up and down in front of one where she had a view of the high street. Rainwater was cascading down the hill like a river, as people darted in groups across from one pub to the other. A car alarm was blaring halfway up the hill, parked outside the Boots on the corner by the traffic crossing. Just as the noise ceased, a young lad broke away from a group walking past, leapt onto the bonnet and stood arms outstretched and jumped up and down. The car alarm started up again as he and his mates whooped and laughed, then ran for it.

Her phone rang and she moved quickly to her desk snatched it up. All eyes were on her as she listened, she replaced the receiver.

‘They’ve lifted a print off one of the baggies, it’s just being scanned into the database.’

The faces of her team lit up.

‘How long will it take?’ asked John.

‘They’re running it through the database with the print we took from Jason Tyler. If it’s a match, we’ll know within the next few minutes.’

The cells of Bromley South Police station were housed in the basement. A thick steel door separated it from the offices and interview suites. Jason Tyler's face dropped when he emerged in handcuffs, escorted by two uniformed officers through the steel doors, to see his Solicitor, Superintendent Yale, DCI Foster, several uniform officers and the rest of her CID team standing by the main desk.

Erika clasped a clipboard with the full list of charges. Jason Tyler wore expensive trainers, blue tracksuit bottoms, a white sleeveless t-shirt and a zip up sports top. Police had arrested him in the early hours of Wednesday morning by police at a gym in Bromley. He stood at just less than five feet, but was powerfully muscled. His dark hair was cropped with a thin Mohawk. His brown eyes were large, but set close together.

'What is this shit?' he started to shout. 'You gotta be fucking kidding me? You've got fuck-all. Giles? GILES?' his Solicitor gave a frustrated shake of his head.

Jason was brought to stand by the duty sergeants' desk. Erika was very tall, standing at just over six foot. Within a professional or personal situation she would often put a little space between herself and a man who was shorter, but she realised what a kick she got from standing in front of him, towering

over the little shit. He glanced up at her then looked away.

‘Jason Paul Tyler. I’m Detective Chief Inspector Erika Foster and I’m here to inform you that this afternoon we recovered a case containing four kilos of heroin with an estimated street value of four million pounds from the bed of the Hayes Quarry. We have positively identified a print of a left index finger from one of the bags inside and have successfully matched this to the print of your left index finger taken when you were arrested. Therefore you are formally charged with intent to supply a controlled illegal substance.’

He didn’t say anything, his small brown eyes bored into hers. Erika read out the rest of the charges, and informed him he would have a bail hearing on Monday morning, where the CPS would press for him to be denied bail.

When he was led back to the cells, they came back up to the offices on the top floor. Only then did they break into whoops of delight. They had come close to having to release Tyler.

‘Okay everyone, that was close to the wire, bloody good work. Now we can link him to the drugs, we need to start thinking about sweetening the deal for Tyler. Maybe he can offer up some names in the hope of a reduced sentence,’ said Superintendent Yale. ‘Trust a bloody drug dealer to put the spanner in the works for any celebration drinks. I wouldn’t advise hitting the pubs now for last orders, unless you want to be roped in by uniform division to help with the chaos.’

Erika was pleased that they were well on the way to nailing Jason Tyler, but she knew that with a plea bargain, and an expensive legal team, he would probably only lose a few years of his life.

‘Congratulations,’ said Yale coming over to her. ‘And I thought I was solving a staffing problem letting you join my team. Seems I’ve inherited a real asset.’

‘Thank you, Sir, I think,’ said Erika. He looked at her curiously.

‘I thought you’d be a bit more stoked about this. We’ve been after Jason Tyler for three years, and you sew it all up in a couple of months.’

‘Sir, it’s far from being sewn up. I know how these things work. Drug dealers have deep pockets, and deep pockets attract the best legal teams...’

He put his finger to his lips. ‘Let’s just stay in the moment.’ He clapped his hands, and put himself back in the middle of the celebrations, announcing, ‘I can’t give you any alcohol, but I’ve got a case off brand cola left over from one of our open days, and I’ve got a spare key for the vending machine!’

Erika looked at the room full of officers celebrating, she sat down on the edge of a desk and for a moment felt exhaustion overwhelm her. She closed her eyes and the image of the tiny skeleton laid out on the banks of the quarry came rushing up to her. She opened her eyes, and her heart was racing. She didn’t feel like celebrating. She picked up her coat, and slipped out of the office.

After the adrenalin rush of the Friday night, Saturday and most of Sunday were equally busy for Erika and the team. Jason Tyler's girlfriend, Theresa and her two children were moved to a safe location, and reports had to be prepared for Monday morning when Jason Tyler would be appearing in court. On Saturday morning a statement was put out to the press detailing the arrest and charging of Jason Tyler, but omitting the discovery of the skeletal remains.

'It will cloud the case, and we need to learn the identity of whoever it is. And if we need to even pursue it,' Superintendent Yale had said. He had sounded hopeful that they were historical remains. Erika wasn't hopeful, but she would at least be able to sleep at night. The skeleton had haunted her dreams. If they were historical remains, it wouldn't make the situation any better, but the killer would most probably be dead too.

On Sunday afternoon she returned to her flat in Forest Hill for a shower, and to rest up before the week ahead. She emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, and was sitting on the sofa watching a film when the phone rang.

'Erika, hi. It's Isaac,' said a smooth male voice. Since she'd moved to London two and half years ago Forensic Pathologist Isaac Strong had become

a friend in addition to a trusted colleague. 'Are you busy?' he added.

'Not really, I'm watching a film. Sarah Jessica-Parker and Bette Midler are on broomsticks, followed by another witch on a vacuum cleaner.'

'Ah, *Hocus Pocus*. I can't believe it's going to be Halloween again...'

'This will be my first Halloween in Forest Hill. I'm thinking being on the ground floor might put me at a disadvantage for trick or treaters,' said Erika pulling the towel off her head with her free hand and rubbing at her wet hair. Isaac paused,

'This isn't a social phone call. It's about the human remains you recovered on Friday at Hayes Quarry.'

She froze with the towel in her hand.

'I thought they went to the anthropology pathologist?' she said.

'They did.'

'So why are you calling me about them?'

'They were with Dr Brian Michaels, but he saw immediately that the clothes and effects are post 1970s. So I took over. The skeleton was sent over yesterday evening...'

'And?'

'And I'm at the morgue in Penge. I need to talk to you. How soon can you get here?' he asked.

'I'm already on my way,' she said dropping the towel and hurrying to get dressed.

Erika's footsteps echoed on the stone floor in the long corridor of the morgue leading down to the autopsy room. She reached a door at the end, and a video camera high on the wall above the door whirred as it turned, almost greeting her. The thick metal door buzzed and clicked open and she went through.

The room was chill and devoid of natural light. The stainless steel refrigeration units lined one wall, and in the centre of the room were four autopsy tables glinting under the fluorescent light. The one closest to the door was laid with a blue sheet, and on it, the small skeleton had been pieced together, laying intact, the bones a shade of dark brown.

Dr Isaac Strong had his back to Erika, and when he heard her enter he straightened up, and turned. He was tall and thin and wore blue scrubs, a white face mask and a tight fitting blue cap. His assistant, a young girl worked quietly and respectfully, neatly snipping a small lock of the wiry brown hair, still attached to the skull. The latex of her gloved hand crackled as she placed the lock of hair in a small clear evidence bag.

'Hello Erika.'

'Thank you for calling me, Isaac,' she said looking past him to the skeleton. There was an unpleasant smell, of stale water, decay, and a meaty

aroma of bone marrow. She looked back to Isaac's face. He pulled down the white mask, raised his immaculately shaped eyebrows, and smiled, breaking through the formality. She smiled back briefly. She hadn't seen him for several weeks. Their friendship was strong, but faced with death, and in this formal setting they were professional. They nodded, reverting to their roles of Forensic Pathologist and Detective Chief Inspector.

'Procedure dictates that I've had to put through a call to the SCIT at Scotland Yard. I presume on Sunday things move a little slowly, but I thought you would like to know my findings.'

'You've contacted the Specialist Casework Investigation Team? That means you've identified who this is?' asked Erika. He put up his hand.

'Let me start from the beginning,' he said. They moved closer to the autopsy table, the grime on the bones contrasted with the pristine sterile sheet where they were neatly arranged. 'This is Lan, my new assistant,' he said indicating the elegant young Chinese girl. She nodded, just her eyes showing over her mask.

'Okay. You can see on the left side of the skull there's a fracture,' said Isaac, gently lifting a matted swirl of coarse brown hair and pulling it away, exposing a crack in the smooth bone of the skull. 'It's six centimetres in length, and I believe this was caused by a blunt object, you can see the impact point here, just above the left eye on the temple. I can only hypothesise at this time that it may have been the cause of death. It certainly would have caused considerable trauma. Two of the teeth are missing, at the top front, and one of the left incisors,' he said moving his gloved hand down to the upper set of brownish yellow teeth. 'Six of the ribs are broken. So is the wrist of the right hand, and there are two fractures on the left femur,' he said moving down the small skeleton to indicate the points. 'The body had been wrapped tightly in plastic, which has kept much of the skeleton intact. Typically in waterways, lakes, or quarries there are pike, freshwater crayfish, eels, and all manner of bacteria and microbes, which will feast and break a corpse down. The plastic

protected the skeleton from all but the smallest of microbes which would have consumed the body.'

Lan stepped away from the autopsy table and retrieved a small stainless steel trolley, which she pushed toward them. On it there were some personal effects removed from the skeleton, placed on another small square of material.

'We found several scraps of woollen clothing, a line of buttons to indicate this may have been a cardigan,' said Isaac showing where some brown threadbare pieces had been reassembled into a vague shape. 'There is also a belt made from a mix of synthetic plastics, you can see the colour has gone but the buckle remains tied.' Lan held up the belt, fastened in a small loop. Erika saw just how tiny the waist must have been that it encircled.

'And there was a small piece of nylon material, still attached to and tied amongst the hair, I think this was a ribbon...'

Erika paused for a moment and swept her eyes across it all. The skeleton, small and vulnerable, stared back at her with empty eye sockets.

'These are the belongings of a young girl?' said Erika.

'Yes. I believe so.'

'Do you have any idea of age?' Erika looked up at Isaac, expecting a blunt response, and for him to give his usual scalding reply, that that this was too early to know for sure.

'I believe that the skeleton is of a seven year old girl called Jessica Collins.'

Erika looked between Isaac and Lan, momentarily stunned. 'What? How do you know?'

'It can be very hard to determine the sex of skeletal remains, in particular if death occurred before the age of puberty. The small amount of clothing encouraged me to take a leap, and we looked into all the cases of missing girls between the ages of eight and sixteen reported in the past twenty-five years. We focused on the missing child reports in the South London area and

Kent borders. When the names came back, I requested dental records. We've matched the teeth to the records of a girl called Jessica Collins.'

Lan went over to the counter and returned with a folder. Isaac took it and slid out an x-ray image, holding it up to the light.

'I don't have a light box anymore, the old one has conked out and I'm waiting for new bulbs,' he said ruefully. 'One of the hazards of x-rays going digital... But this is taken from dental records in July 1989. Jessica Collins was playing in the garden and was hit in the jaw by a cricket ball. She was six years old. If you can see here, there was no damage, but the x-ray showed that the front teeth are indented and slightly twisted, and the bottom set too is uneven. It's a perfect match.'

They looked back at the skeleton. The top teeth, brown and crooked, the jawbone lying neatly beside it, missing teeth, both giving up the secrets of the skeleton's identity.

'I've managed to extract a small amount of bone marrow, and it's going off the lab shortly, but I'm just covering all the bases. I can confirm this is Jessica Collins.' There was a pause. Erika ran her hand through her short blond hair. 'When did you come to the UK, what year?'

'It was September 1990,' she replied.

'Do you remember the Jessica Collins case?'

Erika paused for a moment and raked through the memories of when she moved to the UK from Slovakia, aged eighteen to work as an au pair for the family with two small children in Manchester.

'I don't know. I didn't speak much English, and it was all a culture shock. For the first few months I was working in their house, and I stayed in my room, didn't have a TV...' Erika stopped and realised that Isaac's assistant was watching her closely. 'No, I'm not aware of the case.'

'Jessica Collins went missing on the afternoon of the 7th of August 1990. She left her parents house to go to her friends birthday party in the next street. She never arrived at the party. They never found her. It was as if she'd

vanished into thin air. It was a major headline story.'

Isaac took another piece of paper from the file. It was a photograph of a young blond haired girl with a wide smile. She wore a pink party dress with matching thin belt, a blue cardigan with a white trim, and white sandals with a multi coloured pattern of flowers. In the picture she posed in front of a dark wooden door in what looked like a living room.

There was something about her toothy grin, with the crooked bottom teeth in the picture, which she could see replicated on the jawbone with matching teeth laying on the autopsy table, which made Erika gasp.

'Yes, I remember,' she said softly, now recognising the picture. It had been used in every newspaper story.

'And right now, we're the only three people in the world who know what happened to her,' said Lan, speaking for the first time.

'Apart from the bastard or bastards who killed her,' added Erika.

It got dark as Erika drove back to her flat from the mortuary in Penge. There was little traffic on the roads, and as the light faded, a low fog descended, and so did the gloom in her heart. Throughout her career cases came and went, but there were always some which affected her. She didn't need to work out any dates, for it was always there in the back of her mind. She'd become pregnant, quite by accident late in 2008. She'd fought with her husband Mark, he wanted to keep the baby and she didn't. She'd had the pregnancy terminated. Mark hadn't given his blessing, but he had told her that he would support her in what she wanted to do.

It had been a rough year in the aftermath, she'd lurched between relief and revulsion. She'd blamed herself and she'd blamed Mark for not fighting her hard enough.

It had been a very early on in the pregnancy, but she had been sure it was a girl. If she'd gone through with it she'd now be seven. A baby would have changed things. Mark had offered to be a stay at home dad.

The roads slid past, grim and grey and the tears poured down Erika's face. If Mark had stayed at home, he wouldn't have been there at work that fateful day when he was gunned down. She gulped and sobbed, and then suddenly a woman with a little kid darted out from behind a parked car. Erika

slammed on the brakes just in time, and came screeching to a halt. The woman was young and dressed in a thick pink bomber jacket. She waved that she was sorry and pulled the little kid who was dressed in a skeleton Halloween costume. It turned its little head and a tiny skeleton face stared into the bright headlights. Erika closed her eyes tight, and when she opened them, they were gone.

WHEN SHE ARRIVED HOME. She flicked on the central heating and kept her coat on as she made herself a large coffee and then settled down on the sofa with her laptop. She went straight to Google and typed in “Jessica Collins Missing Girl” a whole page of results came up and she clicked on the first, a Wikipedia entry.

JESSICA MARIE COLLINS (born 11 April 1983) disappeared on the afternoon of 9 August 1990. Shortly after leaving her parents house in Avondale Road, Hayes, Kent to attend the birthday party of a school friend.

On the afternoon of 7 August at 13.45 Jessica left her parents house, alone, to make the short walk to a neighbouring house 1 Avondale Road where her friends birthday party was being held. She never arrived. It wasn't until 16.30, when her parents, Colin and Marianne Collins arrived to collect her, that they raised the alarm.

The disappearance quickly attracted wide media coverage in the UK press. On 21 August, Scotland Yard released photo-fit images of a dark haired man that they wanted to trace in connection with Jessica's disappearance. The man had been seen walking with a young girl close to a local parade of shops three hundred yards from Avondale Road on the afternoon of 7 August 1990. The dark haired man was never found.

In September 1990, another man, 33 year old Trevor Marksman was

arrested by police and questioned, but was released six days later without charge. Police enquiries continued into 1991 and 1992. The missing persons enquiry was scaled back in late 1993.

No further arrests were made and the case remains open. Jessica Peter's body has never been found, and the case remains unsolved.

SHE CHECKED out the location of Hayes quarry on Google Earth. It was less than two miles from Avondale Road where Jessica went missing.

'Surely the quarry must have been dredged when Jessica went missing?' said Erika to herself. She then logged into HOLMES the online police database. The HOLMES system had been in use since 1985, but it took several years for all forces to adopt it fully, and much of the older casework was still recorded on paper. Details of the Jessica Peter's case were sketchy. Erika tipped her head back against the sofa cushion and tried to absorb the information.

When she closed her eyes, an image rushed at her. A skull with bare eye sockets, the jaw and teeth opening wider. She got up to make some coffee when her phone rang. It was Superintendent Yale.

'Sorry to cut into your Sunday night, Erika, but we've just had an offer come in from Jason Tyler. He's agreed to name four of his associates, and hand over emails, and records of bank transfers.'

'You make it sound like he's buying a house from us...'

'You know the score, Erika. We can hand this over to the CPS knowing we'll get a result and probable conviction. It's a result you should be proud of.'

'Thank you, Sir, but the prospect of Tyler going down for a reduced sentence doesn't make me feel proud.'

'But he'll go down.'

'And what's he going to do when he's released? Start up a candle making

business? He'll be back, dealing.'

'Erika where is this coming from? This is the result we wanted. A strong result. He's out of action, we get to his associates, cut off supply to the dealers.'

'What happens to Theresa, and the kids?'

'They'll testify, probably via video link, and they get a new identity.'

'Theresa has an elderly mother and two aunts.'

'And that's very sad, Erika, but she must have known what she was getting into when she hitched her wagon to Jason Tyler. Or did she think all the money coming into their fancy house was from a candle making business?'

'You're right. Sorry, Sir.'

'It's okay.'

'About the skeleton we found in Hayes quarry. It's been identified. A seven-year-old girl called Jessica Collins. Went missing in 1990.'

Yale whistled on the other end of the phone. 'Jesus, that's who you found?'

'Yeah. I know the Forensic Pathologist, he's notified the Specialist Casework Investigation Team, but I'd like to be the SIO on this case.'

There was a pause.

'Erika, what are you talking about? You were assigned to The Projects Team as part of Specialist, Organised and Economic Crime.'

'But Sir, I discovered the remains. It's on our patch. The missing person case was originally led out of our borough...'

'And a lot has changed since the 1990s. We don't deal with kidnap or murder. You know that, we deal with proactive contracts to kill, major drugs suppliers, multi-dimensional crime groups, including ethnically composed gangs, and serious large scale firearms trafficking...'

'And when I joined your team you said I was foisted on you like the aunt that no one wants to have for Christmas...'

‘I didn’t say it quite like that, but you are now a *valuable* part of my team.’

‘Sir, I can solve this case. You know my track record with solving difficult cases. I have unique skills which would benefit a historical murder enquiry...’

‘And yet after all these years you are still a DCI. Have you even considered why?’

Erika was silent on the end of the phone.

‘I expressed that wrongly, I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘But the answer is still no.’

Just before nine pm, Erika parked her car and crossed the road to Commander Marsh's house. It was a smart area of South London near Hilly Fields Park, which looked out over the London skyline, glittering in the darkness.

The large double aspect bay window on the ground floor was in darkness, but lights were on in houses up and down the street and a couple of small groups of little children dressed in Halloween costumes were being escorted down the street and across the road by their parents.

Marcie Marsh emerged from the gate of a house a little way down the road, and with her were two tiny blurs of pink. They came toward her and she could see it was their twin girls dressed as identical fairy princesses, each carrying a little plastic pumpkin filled with sweets. Marcie wore black leggings, pointy ears and her face was painted like a cat. Erika couldn't help but feel irritated by the costume.

'Erika what are you doing here?' she said stopping at the gate. The two little dark haired girls looked up at her. Wee they five or six? Erika couldn't remember.

'I'm sorry, Marcie. I know you hate me making house calls, but this really is very important. I just need to speak to Paul. He's not answering his

phone.'

'Did you try the station?' she asked opening the front gate and ushering the girls down the path.

'He's not answering there either.'

'He's not here,' she replied.

'Trick or treat!' cried one of the girls rushing back toward Erika and holding up her pumpkin.

'Trick or treat!' screamed the other.

'Oh dear. I don't have any sweets... but here's something to get some more!' Erika pulled out two five pound notes and dropped one in each pumpkin. They looked up at Marcie, unsure if this was allowed.

'Wow, look at that, say thank you, girls!'

'Thank you, Erika,' they both squeaked. They were very cute, and Erika smiled back at them.

'Just remember to brush your teeth after all those sweets.'

The girls nodded solemnly.

Erika smiled, 'I'm sorry Marcie. I really need to speak to Paul. Do you know where he is?'

'Hang on...' she opened the door and told the girls to go and get ready for bed and then came back out. 'Didn't he tell you?' she sighed.

'Tell me what?' said Erika surprised.

'We're separated. He moved out three weeks ago.'

'No. I'm sorry. I really didn't know... Where is he?'

'He's been staying at the flat. In Foxberry Road, until we sort something...'

They paused for a moment looking at each other. A cold blast of wind wheeled round the side of the house. The girls shrieked from upstairs.

'I have to go, Erika.'

'I'm really sorry, Marcie.'

'Are you?' she replied pointedly.

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘I’ll see you around,’ said Marcie, and she closed the front door.

Erika heard the twins shrieking, and went back to her car.

Number ninety-seven Foxberry Road loomed over Erika as she pulled up outside. It was at the end of a long line of terraced houses, three storeys high, running down from Brockley train station.

She peered up at the top window. Two years previously she'd rented the top floor flat from Marsh, living there during a long cold winter. As well as the shock of a new city and the loneliness of the sparsely furnished flat, a masked intruder had broken in and nearly killed her.

'You know you could save yourself a lot of hassle and answer your phone, Sir,' said Erika when he opened the main front door.

'Hello to you too. And I'm not your boss anymore, so you can drop the Sir.' He wore thick pyjama bottoms and a faded Homer Simpson t-shirt. 'Is this work related, or did you bring a bottle?'

'Yes and no.'

'You better come in.'

THE SMALL FLAT hadn't changed much in the eighteen months since she'd left. It had a smart chilliness with the generic IKEA furniture. Erika avoided looking in the open bathroom door, as she came through the hall to the living

room. This was where the deranged serial killer David Douglas-Brown had scaled the back wall of the building, punched out the extractor fan and opened the window. That night she had very nearly died as he wrapped his hands around her throat. She had only been saved by her colleague, DI Moss. She thought of Moss, she missed working with her and her other colleagues in the Murder Investigation Team at Lewisham Row.

This sharpened Erika's resolve as Marsh indicated she should sit on the sofa. He went to his phone and switched it on, then moved to fill the kettle. Erika sat.

'Late on Friday I salvaged four million pounds worth of heroin from the bottom of Hayes quarry. We've linked it to...'

'Jason Tyler. Yes I saw. Good work, Erika.'

'Thank you. The marine unit also found human remains half buried in the silt on the quarry bed. It's unrelated to the Tyler case...' Erika went on to outline what she knew so far.

'Jesus. You found Jessica Collins?'

Erika nodded. 'As of yet, no one has been assigned as SIO.'

'I can sense that you are about to cut to the chase,' he said opening the tiny fridge and pulling out a bottle of milk.

'Yes. I need your help please. Make me SIO on the Jessica Collins case.'

Marsh paused with the milk and then slowly opened the carton and began pouring it into two mugs.

'Have you spoken to your Superintendent?'

'Yes.'

'He said no. Didn't he?'

'Yes, he did. Paul, Jessica Collins lay at the bottom of a water filled quarry for twenty-six years. She was eleven when she vanished. Her killer is still on the loose...' Marsh took a deep breath as the kettle boiled and clicked off, the steam hit the underside of the cupboards and began to stream across the ceiling in the tiny living room. 'Paul. You should have seen her, the

skeleton. Part of the head was caved in, bones were broken. She'd been wrapped in plastic and chucked in the water. We don't know if she was still alive when she went in. It looks like she was still wearing the same outfit when she went missing.'

Marsh poured hot water into a small teapot.

'The Specialist Casework Investigation Team will be looking at this, and will assign this case where the funds and manpower available,' he said.

'You think there's a team with a free major incident suite sitting around twiddling their thumbs, just waiting for a case like this?'

'No. But with cutbacks, your Superintendent is probably pushed to breaking point.'

'Every department in the MET is pushed to breaking point, but this case has to go somewhere. We found the remains in my borough. We have the manpower and resources at Bromley South. I'm the senior officer who found the body. This isn't a stretch by any means. You're a Commander now. You can make this happen.'

'Erika, I have to be careful where I interfere right now. You know Assistant Commissioner Oakley has just taken early retirement? I don't yet have the same rapport with his replacement.'

'Who is his replacement?'

'It's not being officially announced until tomorrow morning.'

'Come on, you can tell me. It's not as if I'll go and doorstep him...'
Marsh raised an eyebrow. 'I promise I won't doorstep him.'

'Her. The new Assistant Commissioner is Camilla Brace-Cosworthy...'
Marsh stirred the tea in the pot then poured, adding, 'The look on your face says it all.'

'Let me guess. She went to Oxford?'

'No. Cambridge. Joined the force on the accelerated promotion course.'

'So she's never been on the beat?'

'That's not what it's about these days.'

‘What do you mean? There are officers out there every day on the beat, cleaning up the shit and the problems. Why is the Assistant Commissioner never anyone who’s worked his or her way up from the bottom? Someone who has had to fight to get where they are, who knows what it’s like? Once again we’ve got someone in charge who knows nothing about life, beyond a small sphere of public school and holidays in the home counties.’

‘That’s not fair. You don’t know her.’

‘And I’m the only one who’ll be thinking it? No. But I’m probably the only one who’s saying it out loud...’

He handed her a mug of tea with a small smile. ‘You’ve got a chip on your shoulder.’

‘And?’

‘And. I’m enjoying your rant. It’s quite entertaining when it’s not directed at me.’

‘Look, Paul. I’m aware I can be a dick. If I wasn’t such a dick, I know I’d be a Superintendent by now, hell I may well even be a Chief Superintendent...’

‘Easy now...’

‘But I’ve learned a lesson. Please, can you pull some strings, and get me put on the Jessica Collins case. Think of it as a great thing for the MET police budget. You get my wealth of experience all for the cut price salary of a DCI.’

‘Erika...’

‘I had time to think after the last case. I had time to think about what you said to me, and you were right. I am irresponsible. I do have a poor attitude and I go against authority. But I’m fucking good. And I know I can catch the bastard who did this. He, or she is out there and thinks after all these years they’ve got away with it. But I’m going to get them.’

‘The case, it’s a poisoned chalice,’ said Marsh. ‘You’ve heard of what happened to the SIO who worked on it back in the day, DCI Amanda Baker?’

She was thrown off the case.'

'I was thrown off three huge cases, then fought my way back to solve them.'

'She wasn't like you. Well, she was, she was a brilliant officer, but she wasn't strong, up here,' he said tapping his forehead. 'She was one of the first female DCI's in the MET and the first to be assigned to such a high profile case with the disappearance of Jessica Collins. She had it really tough from her peers, those high up in the MET and the press. They were so suspicious as to why a woman had landed the job of SIO.'

'How did she land the job then?'

'Damage limitation. So many mistakes were made in the first few days after Jessica's disappearance; the police were facing a lot of questions. Putting a female DCI in place as SIO was a good story to distract from this, to put the police in a good light.'

'But she had people who believed she could do it?'

'Yes, and no. She was brilliant, but she couldn't take the pressure. Top brass were unaware that in the months leading up to her being put on the case, she'd been seeing a therapist. She'd spent several years, as she rose up through the ranks, working on rape cases. Back then it was a given that if you were a female officer you'd be given the rape cases to deal with. Amanda would take evidence at the scene, or shortly afterwards, and she's support these women through the whole awful process. The only problem was that she didn't know how to let go, how to separate herself from work. She'd stay in contact with these women for weeks, months, even years afterwards. She saved a lot of women from the abyss. The only problem was that no one was looking out for her. She was about to be signed off sick when she got the call that she was going to be SIO. Eventually she cracked under the pressure.'

'You know I'm not going to crack under the pressure,' said Erika quietly. 'I will crack, however, if I have to spend the next few years on the merry go round of taking drug dealers off the street, only for another one to take his

place.'

Marsh nodded. They sat for a moment and drank their tea.

'Paul, please. This is a seven year old who was abducted off the street. She's lain at the bottom of that quarry for twenty-six years. Imagine if someone did that to one of your...'

'No! Erika *do not* bring my girls into this.'

'Jessica was someone's daughter... You can make this happen.'

Marsh rubbed his eyes,

'I can put in a word, but that's all it will be. I can't promise anything.'

'Thank you,' said Erika, she took a gulp of her tea. 'But as far as Superintendent Yale is concerned, I was never here, I never spoke to you.'

'Ok... Aren't you going to ask me about Marcie?' he said after a pause.

'No. I figured if you want to talk about it, you would.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'We're trying to work things out. We're on a break.' Erika raised an eyebrow. 'Her words, not mine. She wants to 'go on a break' whilst she finds out...' his voice cracked and it tailed off. 'She met someone else.'

'She's the one who cheated?' asked Erika surprised.

'Yes. Some bloke she met at one of her art classes. *Keir*.'

'Already, he sounds like a twat,' said Erika. Marsh grinned weakly.

'He's twenty-nine. He goes to the gym. He's like a model.'

'He sounds like a fad. Marcie loves you. Hang in there.'

'Did you think it would be me?' he said suddenly. 'Did you think I'd be the one to have an affair?'

'Yes.'

He looked hurt. 'Come on. You know what I mean. You occupy a position of power, there are plenty of nubile young girls working as support staff, I figured you and Marcie were having, troubles. And power like yours is a great aphrodisiac.'

'Is it?' he asked looking at her.

‘Power is, for some women an aphrodisiac. You must know that?’

He nodded. ‘Would you like another cup, or something stronger?’

‘No. I’d best be getting going.’

‘If you want, you can stay,’ he said softly.

‘What? I live just up the road...’

‘I just meant, that’s it’s late and...’

‘No, Paul. I won’t be staying.’

‘You could be more polite!’

‘You have two small children. And just because Marcie has decided that she wants to shop around doesn’t mean you should do the same thing.’

‘What? I didn’t mean it like that! I meant you could sleep on the sofa.’

‘I *know* how you meant it. This sofa is barely four foot long, and this is a one bedroom flat. Would this be my payment to you for you putting in a good word?’

‘Bloody hell!’ Marsh began to shout. ‘It was a kind offer to a friend...’

‘I’m not stupid, Paul.’

‘You are. You’re bloody stupid! How can someone be so smart at work and so stupid in life!’

Erika got up, grabbed her coat and left his flat. She thundered down the communal stairs, and came out of the front door slamming it behind her. At the car she fumbled in her pocket for the keys, which were caught on a piece of the lining of her pocket.

‘Shit!’ she said yanking at them. ‘Shit, shit, shit!’ They came out of her pocket ripping the lining and she unlocked and got in. She slammed her hand on the wheel and tipped her head back against the head rest.

‘Yes, I am stupid,’ she murmured.

When Erika arrived at Bromley Station early on Tuesday morning she bumped into Superintendent Yale coming out of the men's toilet with a copy of *The Observer* under his arm.

'Erika, can I have a word?' he said. She nodded and followed him up to his office. He closed the door and moved round his desk, indicating she should sit.

'I've just had a call from our new Assistant Commissioner,' he said settling in the chair behind his desk with a creak.

'Camilla Brace-Cosworthy?' asked Erika.

'Yeah. I thought she was calling to introduce herself to me.'

'I thought she'd just copy you in on a group email,' said Erika. The second it came out of her mouth she wish she hadn't said it. He paused, and seemed to let that one go.

'She wants to meet you.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Really. I don't have the ear of the new Assistant Commissioner. She's only held her position for one day. And yet she wants to meet with you about the Jessica Collins case.... Know something I don't?'

'No, Sir,' she lied.

‘I’m your senior officer, and we had discussed this. I said that we don’t have the resources or time to deal with a major historical case such as this. Obviously it wasn’t the answer you wanted, and now I’m getting cold calls from the Assistant Commissioner.’

‘I haven’t approached her.’

‘Who did you approach?’

‘No one.’

Yale sat back in his chair and laughed,

‘You seem to have nine lives, Erika. I’d assumed with the amount of begging that went on from Commander Marsh, begging me to find a place for you on my team, that you and him have a special bond...’

‘We trained together. We were officers on the beat at the same time, he was good friends with my late husband too. And he’s married.’ Erika sat back and tried to stay calm.

‘Marsh will be attending this meeting too. Did you know that?’

‘No, I didn’t, Sir. And you know that I’m very grateful for the opportunity you’ve given me,’ said Erika.

He nodded, unconvinced. ‘They’re expecting you at eleven. You need to report to her office at New Scotland Yard.’ He didn’t wait for her to answer, but she could see that the meeting was over when he turned and started working on his computer.

‘Thank you, Sir. What about Jason Tyler?’

‘I’ve got it covered.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’ She got up to leave.

‘Erika, even cats run out of lives. Use the ones you have left wisely,’ he said looking up for a moment before returning to his work.

At the New Scotland Yard building, Erika arrived twenty minutes early for her meeting. She passed the iconic revolving sign outside the front entrance, and was given an ID badge at the front desk and told to go to the fourteenth floor.

When Erika came out of the lifts a smart young receptionist welcomed her, asking if she would like a drink whilst she waited. Erika accepted some water, and sat in one of a selection of elegant armchairs.

There were a fan of magazines on a long table; the MET police's internal magazine *The Job* was at the front of the fan, and the outgoing Assistant Commissioner Oakley was on the front cover. He stood in his dress uniform against a gleaming shelf of legal volumes. Erika always thought he looked like a sleek, sly fox. His hair was shiny and immaculately groomed and his braided cap tucked neatly under his arm. She picked up the magazine and peered closer. She had no doubt he wore a toupee. If he had been an officer on the beat it would have been picked up by a rogue gust of wind or yanked off by some kid on its first ASBO, she thought.

She'd never been invited to his office, when this had been his office, and it seemed any trace of him had been rapidly swept away. The chairs were new, Erika noted as a young man in a suit and a security ID lanyard started

removing the plastic off a chair at the end. Fanned out, after *The Job* were copies of *Time*, *The Economist*, *Vogue*, *Men's Health* and *Vanity Fair*.

Erika looked up at the security camera housed in a small perspex dome above the receptionists desk. She wondered if the magazines were a test. Would she be judged on which one she'd picked up? Her first choice was *Vanity Fair*, with *Vogue* a close second, but she picked up *Time* magazine and pretended to read it, feeling nervous, wondering just what this meeting would be about.

On the dot of 10am, a lady wearing a smart black trouser suit with glasses on a chain around her neck, appeared through the double doors of the office, and asked Erika to come through.

The office was immaculate with a thick carpet, and lined with shelves full of legal books. Behind them the Thames glinted, and the view seemed to carry on for miles. Assistant Commissioner Camilla Brace-Cosworthy sat at a large polished wood desk. She wore her dress uniform, with its white blouse and her neckerchief. Next to her sat Marsh, he too was in his official uniform.

'Come in, do take a seat,' said Camilla. Her posh accent emphasising the 'do'.

'Good afternoon, sir, marm,' said Erika.

'Thank you for agreeing to meet with us, Erika,' said Marsh.

'We're attending an official luncheon later, so we're all togged up in our best,' said Camilla.

'Congratulations on your new appointment, marm,' said Erika. Camilla batted her away with a sideways hand gesture, and slipped on a pair of large designer black framed glasses on a chain around her neck.

'Time will tell if I can live up to the hype,' she said looking at her with magnified eyes. *False modesty* thought Erika. The woman in front of her was confident.

'We're here to talk about the Jessica Collins case,' started Marsh. 'You recovered the remains on Friday, and they've been officially identified?'

He knew this, of course, she'd told him when he was at home in his Homer Simpson t-shirt.

'Yes, sir. I was working with the Marine Recovery unit for an unrelated drug case, when we found her remains...'

Erika saw she had a file on her desk, and was flipping through it. *They have a file on me?*

'I see you've worked on several Murder Investigation Teams, both in London and in Manchester?' asked Camilla

'I worked for Chief Superintendent, sorry, Commander Marsh.'

She closed the file, and took off her glasses, slipping one of the stems into the corner of her mouth.

'Your move to Bromley South was a demotion. A lower pay grade. Why?'

'She felt she was being overlooked,' said Marsh.

'There was an opportunity for a promotion to Superintendent, for which I believe I was overlooked, by your predecessor Marm. This was at the time when I successfully caught Simone Matthews who...'

'The Night Stalker killer. She went on *quite* the rampage,' said Camilla. In her plummy tones, Erika couldn't tell if she was expressing horror or admiration.

'I took what I believed was a stand and I challenged Commander Marsh who was my senior officer at the time, threatening to leave. However he took me up on it...'

'But it's Commander Marsh who called me and has been quite insistent that you run the Jessica Collins case,' said Camilla, chewing on the stem of her glasses.

'I feel that DCI Foster still has much she can offer...' started Marsh. Camilla replaced her glasses and looked back at the file.

'You've had quite a chequered career. Along with The Night Stalker, you were responsible for catching multiple murderer David Douglas-Brown,

multiple murderer Barry Paton...’

‘The York Strangler, marm.’

‘I have it all here. The York Strangler killed eight school girls, and you made quite a leap, identifying him from the reflection caught in a shop window opposite his doctors surgery...’

‘Yes, and he still thanks me for it every Christmas and birthday.’

Marsh grinned, but Camilla did not,

‘You weren’t so lucky with some of your other cases. You were suspended two years ago pending an investigation...’

‘I was subsequently cleared...’

‘If you’ll let me finish. You were suspended pending an investigation. You led a drug raid on an estate in Greater Manchester, resulting in the deaths of five officers, one of whom was your husband.’

Erika nodded.

‘How do you come back from that?’ asked Camilla, again watching her closely as she chewed on the stem of her glasses.

‘I received counselling, I almost lost track of who I was, and if I wanted to stay in the force. But I did come back, and the results are in my file in front of you. I know in the past I’ve locked horns with my senior officers, but I have always aimed for one goal and that’s to uphold the law to the highest standards, and catch the bad guys.’

‘The bad guys!’ Camilla exclaimed with a grin, which then quickly vanished. ‘The Jessica Collins case shares much with the Madeline McGann case in its notoriety and complexity. I need an officer who is strong, smart, and media savvy to navigate the re-opening of this investigation. Why do you think you’re the one for the job?’

‘I’m not a career police officer. I dedicate myself totally to cases, and I don’t give up until I’ve found the killer. It won’t be about my career, it will be about finding justice for Jessica. I want her family to be able to move on and grieve.’

Erika sat back, she realised she was sweating. Marsh looked a little uncomfortable too.

‘Justice for Jessica, we could use that,’ he said.

‘No,’ said Camilla shooting him a withering look. ‘Would you mind waiting outside for a moment, DCI Foster?’

Erika came back out to the waiting area. The girl behind the desk didn’t look up. The magazines were neatly back in their fan.

So many times she thought her career was over, and here she was, again at the start of something exciting. *Was she at the edge of a step up, or a precipice?* she thought.

There was a chime from the phone behind the desk and the girl asked Erika to go back into the office.

Camilla was pulling her police jacket on and straightening her hair by a coat stand in the corner. Marsh stood patiently by her desk.

‘DCI Foster. Thank you for coming in today. I’m pleased to say, we’d like to put you in as the Senior Investigating Officer on the Jessica Collins case.’

‘Thank you, Marm. You won’t regret your decision.’

Camilla pulled on her braided cap and adjusted it in the mirror and turned.

‘I hope you don’t regret it,’ she came over and shook Erika’s hand, realising she had to look up at her. ‘Commander Marsh will brief you on the full details. I have to fly, I’m due at a meeting with the Commissioner.’

‘Please give my regards to Sir Brian,’ said Marsh. Camilla nodded and showed them to the door.

ERIKA AND MARSH rode down in the lift in silence.

‘You’ll be running the case from the incident room at Bromley South, I’ll be overseeing this, and you’ll report to me.’

‘What about Superintendent Yale?’

‘Hasn’t he got enough on his plate?’

‘He thinks I went behind his back.’

‘You did go behind his back.’

‘But it wasn’t personal.’

‘Things always seem personal with you, Erika.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I never know what you’re thinking. You’re direct to the point of being brutal. You don’t trust many people.’

‘And?’

‘And, it’s tough to work with that.’

‘If I were a male DCI, would we be having this conversation in a lift? Would you be asking what I’m thinking?’ Marsh scowled and looked away.

‘What’s going on here? Is this about the other night?’

Marsh looked at the floor for a moment then back up her. ‘You need to do your job here, DCI Foster, and you need to do it well.’

‘I always do.’

‘The fuck -ups on the last investigation nearly led to an inquiry. Make this right. Find who did this. Close the case.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘I’ll be making arrangements for all files and materials relating to the two previous investigations to be sent over to Bromley Cross Station,’ said Marsh now sounding businesslike. ‘You need to get your incident room up and running and there will be a briefing with your team at 3pm.’

‘So are you in charge or am I?’

‘You’ll report to me, I’ll report to the Assistant Commissioner. You’ll also need to work closely with Superintendent Yale as you’ll be utilising his resources.’

‘Do I get to choose my team?’

‘Who do you have in mind?’ asked Marsh.

Erika didn't see Superintendent Yale until the next morning when she was about to go into her first briefing as SIO in one of the top floor conference rooms at Bromley Station.

He was coming down the hall with a steaming mug of tea, which said, 'Who's the boss?' Erika saw it and quickly looked away, but he noticed.

'Sorry I haven't been able to come and talk to you, Sir. Yesterday was a little crazy. I had to get up to speed on the Jessica Collins case and...'

'So you've been given your own corner of my station?'

'I haven't been given it, Sir. It was recently vacated by Operation Hawthorne, the Human trafficking enquiry. And I'll be briefing you all the time as we'll be using civilian support staff. And I've also requested DC McGorry join the team. He was with me when I recovered the body, and he's a great officer.'

'You think I can spare him?'

'It would be an opportunity for him to join, well what I believe is a murder enquiry. He's got a good people skills. People respond well to him. We're going to have to tease a lot of information out of people who might be reluctant to talk. He puts them at ease.'

Yale scratched at his hair, which stood up in a messy red fuzz.

‘Okay.’

‘And I’ve requested two officers from my old nick in Lewisham, DI Peterson and DI Moss. Brilliant officers.’

‘It’s your team.’

‘I’m just keeping you in the loop, Sir.’

Marsh appeared at the end of the corridor behind Yale,

‘I need your final report on my desk for the Jason Tyler case. I’m handing over everything to the CPS. He was denied bail, he’s got a preliminary hearing next month.’

‘Very good, Sir. I’ll have that report done for you.’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Marsh. Yale turned and clocked his uniform.

‘Good to see you, Sir.’

‘I’m here for the first briefing. DCI Foster will be reporting to me, but of course I respect that this is your nick and I will endeavour to keep you up to speed with everything, and so will Erika, DCI Foster.’

There was an awkward moment before Yale excused himself and moved off down the corridor. Erika took a deep breath and they went into the conference room. Four long tables were arranged in a square, and all seats were full. It was a mixture of support staff, the police media liaison team, some new faces she didn’t know yet, the CID officers she’d been assigned.

‘Good afternoon everyone,’ said Marsh. ‘I’ll make my part of this brief. This is complex case, with a great deal of emotion attached to it. Two previous MET police investigations have failed to solve this, and Jessica Collins disappearance captured the public’s attention. We also have to tread a fine line with the Collins family, and remain sensitive but alert. As I always say, everyone is a suspect... DCI Foster is SIO on this case and you will take everything to her. She will be reporting to me on all aspects. Thank you in advance for being part of this investigation and I’ll now hand over to DCI Foster.’

Marsh went to a corner and stood by the door and Erika moved to the

front. There was a knock at the door as another delivery of cardboard file boxes were brought in on a trolley and placed with a growing pile along the back wall. Erika stared at the rows of boxes, waiting expectantly.

‘Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for making yourselves available so quickly...’ Erika went on to give them a brief outline of the Jessica Collins case, and the developments so far. ‘With this case we’re opening a Pandora’s box, or should I say, many boxes,’ she added alluding to the case files which had grown as she spoke and were now piled high, filling the length of the back wall. ‘What we all need to do is focus in on the facts pertaining to Jessica’s disappearance. Ignore the fiction, of which there is much. As well as this vast amount of paperwork generated by the two previous failed investigations, there are two documentaries about Jessica’s disappearance, four books have been published, and there are reams and reams of tabloid articles. We all know the saying that yesterdays news is todays chip paper, but unfortunately a lot of those chip papers will have stuck in the minds of the public. Ingraining the lies and inaccuracies that have been written... We can’t predict how the discovery of Jessica Collins remains will run in the media, but we have to stay ahead of things. And unlike the 1990s, the challenge may be even greater. We now have rolling news, social media, blogs and online forums, all of whom will dredge things up and regurgitate them twenty-four seven. So, these files along the wall need to be re-visited, top to tail, and fast. We also need to build up a profile from the results of the autopsy...’

There was a knock at the door and John entered, looking worried and breathless.

‘Is this where I’m supposed to be?’ he asked looking around.

Erika nodded. ‘This is Detective Constable John Mc Gorry. He was with me when we discovered Jessica’s remains. Take a seat, John.’ Erika went on,

‘I need all witness statements to be re-visited and cross-checked, and I want a timeline of events up here on the boards. The days leading up to and

Jessica's disappearance. I want to know everything about Hayes Quarry. What it's been used for over the years. Why was Jessica's body never found? I'm going straight from here to inform the Collins family, who will no doubt have many questions for me. The moment the family is informed, we'll be making a statement to the media. I need you to hit the ground running with this one. We'll report back here tomorrow morning at 10 am. John you're with me.'

The incident room leapt to life.

'Sorry, Boss. I only just heard I was with you, which is great...' said John coming over. "Where are we going?'

'We have to inform the family. Detective Constable Nancy Greene was the original family liaison officer for the Matthews family. She's now retired, but has agreed to accompany us.'

'Where do they live now?'

'In the same house they were in when Jessica disappeared,' said Erika.

Marianne Collins unlocked her front door and staggered into the porch, laden down with shopping bags. She used her elbow to open the inner door, and was greeted by the large, empty carpeted hallway. It was a dark and dingy afternoon, and she'd left all the lights on. At a push she could cope with the gloom, but it was the emptiness. She felt it in her house and her heart. She left the shopping pooled on the carpet by the large wooden staircase, took her coat off and hung it on the coat stand by the mirror.

Her shoulder length gray hair was parted and tied back at the nape of her neck. It seemed to drag her face down at each side, further accentuating her broken-heartedness. On the wall behind her was a large picture of Our Lady, the blessed Virgin Mary. It's beauty never failed to move her. Mary stood on a cloud swathed in red white a turquoise robes, the christ child was in her arms, so beautiful and above her head she was watched over by winged angels. She liked to stand here for a moment when she came home, drinking in the peace and knowing that Mary was watching over her.

After a moment she went through to the kitchen, deciding to have a cup of tea before tackling the bags. She filled the kettle and put a tea bag in her favourite white mug, again with a picture of Our Lady. The kitchen hadn't had much more than a lick of paint and new appliances in the twenty-six

years since her daughter Jessica disappeared. This was the fourth fridge, the newest was only a few months old, but the same picture had been re-attached. A simple finger-painting, by Jessica.

As she opened the steel fridge door, she stopped to look at it. Small hand prints in yellow, red, and green. Fine white lines and creases criss-crossed each palm where the paint hadn't reached. The original, painted sometime in 1989 was tucked away in a drawer, wrapped in tissue paper. After several years on display, and much to her horror and dismay, the paint had started to fade, so she'd had it scanned and this was a print out. Even the original scan had been re-printed several times. Marianne ran a finger over it, noting the edges were starting to curl, and retrieved the milk.

Her grief was ingrained; it was part of her now. The tears still came but she had learned to live with the pain, like a constant companion. Looking at the finger painting, seeing photos of Jessica, walking past her bedroom on her way to the bathroom several times a day were habit.

The kettle clicked off and she filled her mug, dunking the tea bag before fishing it out with a spoon, and moving over to the bin. She was about to pour in the milk when the doorbell chimed. She looked at the clock and saw it was just after four.

The bell chimed again just as she reached the door, and when she opened it, Marianne froze. A familiar face stood amongst a group of men and women. It was Detective Constable Nancy Greene, a woman she hadn't seen in years.

'Hello Marianne,' smiled Nancy weakly. They embraced. They separated, and Marianne searched Nancy's face, noting deep wrinkles, and grey hair. It was only then that she saw, amongst the group, were two police officers in uniform.

'Nancy? Why are you here?' started Marianne.

'Can we come in please?' said Nancy.

Marianne gulped and a shaking hand went to her throat to feel for a

necklace which wasn't there.

'Not until you tell me what this is?'

'These are police officers. Detective Chief Inspector Foster, Detective Constable John McGorry, PC Ward, and PC Stoke. And this is Coleen Scanlan. She's the MET police media liason,' said Nancy.

'Good evening, Mrs Collins,' said Erika, holding up her ID. The other officers followed suit.

'Can we come in please?' asked Nancy.

'Now is not a good time. I'm expecting, someone,' said Marianne.

'Please can we come in. This is important. I'm here because I was your Family Liaison Officer, back when Jessica disappeared...'

'Mrs Collins, can we please come inside, this is very important,' said Erika. Marianne nodded, as if realising what was happening. She stood to one side and let them in. They came through to the large living room. It was elegant but cold, with dark wood furniture and dark wine coloured curtains and furniture.

'Would anyone like tea? I've just made a cup,' asked Marianne, forcing herself to sound bright and happy.

'No, thank you,' said Nancy. The officers stood for a moment in a semi circle.

'Sit down,' said Marianne. They sat on the large sofa and the two armchairs. Nancy took the chair close to Marianne. When Erika sat she noticed the large painting of the Virgin Mary above the carved fireplace and with a glance around the room counted four crucifixes of varying size on the walls. Marianna pulled out the small foot rest which matched the seat Nancy occupied. She perched on it and started to gabble,

'How long has it been since I last saw you... Laura is working over in Kew... She's trying to have another baby, it will be her fourth if she does, but she's getting old. Although these days but...'

'Marianne,' started Nancy.

‘Toby has a new *partner*, he works in property... They seem happy, they know how I feel about that sort of thing but...’

‘Marianne, please...’

Her bottom lip started to tremble and tears pooled in her eyes, ‘Let me make some tea, would you all like tea’ said Marianne scrabbling in her cardigan sleeve for a tissue, pulling it out and scrubbing at her eyes.

‘Marianne sit down we have something to tell you,’ said Erika.

‘I’ll do what I fucking well like in my fucking house!’ she shouted rising. She paced up and down looking at the police officers, and she started to hyperventilate.

‘Please Marianne, can you calm down,’ said Nancy getting up and taking Marianne by the hands

‘No! No! NO!’ started Marianne.

‘The police called me, because I was here for you when...’

‘Please, no!’

‘When Jessica...’

‘Don’t say her name. You don’t have the right!’

Nancy went on, gently, ‘When Jessica disappeared.’

‘No. No...’

‘On Friday night the police were conducting a routine search of a local quarry, and they found some human remains.’

Marianne was now silent. Her eyes wide and glassy. She shook her head and started walking backwards until her back was against the wall. Above her head were three oil paintings, Erika recognised one as Jessica, and she presumed her two siblings. Nancy got up, went to Marianne, and gently took her hands again.

‘I’m so sorry. The police found remains of a skeleton. The remains belong to Jessica,’ she said softly. Marianne shook her head, tears were flowing down her cheeks.

‘No, no, you’ve made a mistake! She’ll come back, someone will find

her. She probably can't remember who her real family is! She's out there!

'It was Jessica,' said Nancy who had tears in her eyes also. 'They've identified her from dental records.'

Marianne nodded, and kept nodding tears streaming silently down her face.

'Mrs Collins,' said Erika softly. 'We need to speak to your husband, your daughter, Laura, and your son, Toby. They're all in Spain is that correct? Do you have a number we can call. We'd like the family to be informed before we make a statement to the press...'

'Of course,' said Marianne softly. Her eyes were wide in disbelief.

'What can I do?' asked Nancy.

Marianne pulled her hand back and punched her in the face. Nancy staggered backwards blood pouring from her nose. John and one of the uniform officers leapt up and went to her lying on the floor.

'Get out of my house, all of you!' screamed Marianne. 'Get out! GET OUT!'

From behind the living room curtain, came the sound of cars arriving, and lights began to flare. The media had heard the news and was descending on the house once again.

Ten miles away, in a small terraced house in Tooting Bec in south east London, the television buzzed and flickered from the corner of a messy living room. The afternoon was fading behind low grey cloud, and retired DCI Amanda Baker sat opposite, slumped in a saggy armchair; her head flopped forward, sleeping. The lights were off, and the light from the TV screen played her loose jowly face, the burst of studio audience laughter failing to wake her. On a low table beside her was an overflowing ashtray and a half full glass of white wine. This was all that was left of the second bottle she'd opened. She'd pulled the cork on the first at nine thirty am, when the breakfast dishes had been stacked in the sink, and the shakes and sweats got too bad.

Her house had been smart. It was decorated in a cold elegant style, much like its owner had looked, but now, like its owner, it was shabby. A fake glow fire rippled in hues of red and orange in the hearth, and a dog's basket beside it was covered in a thick layer of dust.

The phone started ringing in the hall, screeching above the sound of the TV, until it went to answerphone. It was then that Amanda woke.

'What was that?' she said absently. There was a barking sound, and she rubbed a hand over her face, heaved herself up from the chair and wobbled

through to the kitchen, brain foggy, and eyes bleary. She spent a few minutes rummaging through her cupboard full of tinned food, when she realised that her dog had died a few months ago. She stopped, leaning against the counter. Tears fell onto the crumb-covered work surface with a soft pat. She wiped her face with her sleeve, catching a whiff of her stale breath.

The phone shrieked again from the hallway, and she shuffled through and answered, leaning on the bannister for support.

‘Is this former Detective Chief Inspector Amanda Baker?’ came a young female voice with an edge.

‘Who is this?’

‘I’m calling for a statement about Jessica Collins, now that the police have recovered her body.’

Amanda rocked back on her heels for a moment.

‘What?’

‘Jessica Collins,’ repeated the voice impatiently. ‘Went missing in 1990. You were the lead officer investigating, until you were dismissed...’

‘I took early retirement...’

‘Her remains were discovered by police.’

‘What?’

‘So you didn’t know?’

‘She’s been found?’

‘Her skeleton was found in Hayes Quarry. It’s a flooded...’

‘I know where it is.’

‘Do you have a comment?’

From her spot in the hall by the bannister, Amanda could see the television screen in the living room; *BREAKING NEWS* was rolling across the screen. A ticker tape headline ran underneath saying *REMAINS BELONGING TO MISSING GIRL JESSICA COLLINS DISCOVERED*. The sound was off, and the picture changed to show images of Marianne and Martin Collins, at a police press conference in 1990, speaking into a

microphone, supported by a much younger version of herself, behind them was the old MET police logo on white.

‘So, do you have a comment?’ asked the voice. She sounded interested, could smell blood.

‘We checked, I checked that quarry. She wasn’t there...’ said Amanda, more to herself.

‘Is that your comment? Cos, I’m looking through and that’s on record...’

Amanda leaned on the bannister, watching as a tall blond-haired officer was reading from a statement. Her name flashed up at the bottom of the screen “DCI Erika Foster”.

‘They found photos of Jessica in a local sex offender’s house, a man called Trevor Marksman. You let him go though, didn’t you?’

‘I had no choice! There wasn’t enough evidence.’

‘Trevor Marksman is still a free man. Do you still feel you’ve got blood on your hands?’

‘Leave me alone!’ shrieked Amanda, and she slammed down the phone. As soon as it hit the cradle it began to ring again. She kneeled down on the floor pushing through piles of old newspapers, magazines, and junk mail. She grabbed the wire and yanked it out of the wall. The phone fell silent. She rushed through to the living room and turned up the sound,

‘We’d like to extend our condolences to the Collins family. The historical murder case has been re-opened and we are actively pursuing several new leads. Thank you.’

The camera zoomed out as the tall blond officer went into the Scotland Yard building flanked by two other officers. The image on the screen flicked back to the BBC news studio and the next news item.

Amanda sat back on her haunches and took deep breaths, her whole body shaking. She noticed a small white squeaky toy rabbit peeping out from the piles of old junk. It had belonged to her dog, Sandy. She reached out, picked it up, and hugged it to her chest. She began to cry, for Jessica, for her beloved

Sandy, and for the life she should have had.

When she finally stopped, she wiped her face with her sleeve and went to the kitchen and opened her third bottle of wine.

It was late and raining as Erika drove to the main entrance of Accident and Emergency at Lewisham Hospital. Through the swishing wipers she saw DC Nancy Greene waiting under the flying canopy. An ambulance pulled away, as an elderly lady was stretchered through the automatic doors, a withered arm poking out from under a red blanket and raised in pain.

Erika pulled up, and opened the passenger window. Nancy had a thick square bandage taped to her nose, spotted with blood. 'Get in quick, there's another ambulance coming up behind.'

Nancy opened the door and climbed in, clutching a small white paper bag.

'Broken. In two places,' she said touching the thick white bandage gingerly as she eased herself into the passenger seat. The bandage gave her nose a beaky quality, and with her large brown eyes looking over she reminded Erika of an Owl. She helped Nancy fasten the seatbelt, then put the car in gear and pulled away.

'Thanks for coming. In all the chaos you were the last person I expected. I was waiting for a cab which never arrived. I saw your statement on TV. You did good.'

'Thanks,' said Erika, putting the windscreen wipers on a faster speed to

deal with the rain pouring down.

‘Is Marianne okay?’ asked Nancy.

‘Laura is staying with her at the house. We called a doctor, he’s given her something so she can sleep...’

They reached the exit, and came to a stop behind a car waiting to pull out. ‘Where are we going?’

‘I’m the other side of Dulwich. Head through Forest Hill.’

The car in front pulled out, and they could see the road was busy with rush hour traffic. A car slowed and let Erika pull out of the junction and she waved thanks. The rain came down harder, pounding on the top of the line of cars stretching ahead of them.

‘I thought you could help me out, in return for a lift,’ said Erika.

‘Ah, so your lift has an ulterior motive?’ she said. She tried to turn her head but winced.

‘Sorry. I’m trying to get up to speed on this case. You were the Family Liaison Officer the whole time, from when Jessica disappeared?’

‘Yes, far too long to be honest. It’s all on record, but I can fill you in... Jesus this hurts,’ she said grimacing. She undid the paper bag, popped another pill out from the foil sheet and swallowed it dry.

‘I have to ask if you want to press charges?’ said Erika inching the car forward in the traffic.

‘Against Marianne? God no,’ said Nancy leaning back against the headrest. ‘Although I would like to complain about those bloody doctors. They’ve given me a pitiful amount of painkillers... Marianne was never violent, in all the years, through all the heartbreak. Sometimes with Family Liaison work you feel like a spare part. You want to be out there on the beat, amongst the action but you’re making tea, and answering the phone.’

‘Family Liaison work is important.’

‘I know, but in a weird way I’m pleased I was there, to take the punch... They never write in police reports about all the cups of tea you make, or the

advice you give. This will be documented. And in a weird way its closure.'

'How long were you there in the house after Jessica first disappeared?'

'I spent the first few months, from the summer of 1990 virtually living with the family. Marianne and Martin were still together.'

'When did they divorce?'

'No separated in ninety-seven. They lasted longer than I expected. When a couple loses a child, the strain nearly always rips them apart. But they had little Toby, who was only four when Jessica vanished, and he was the glue that kept them from coming unstuck. Laura, was a lot older. She'd already done her first year at university. She delayed going back for her second year, but she should have gone, really. She and Marianne have always clashed.'

'How did they clash?'

'Marianne just tuned out everything, poured her energy into trying to find Jessica. Toby was tiny, and Laura ended up having to look after him.'

'How old is Toby now?'

'Twenty-nine. He's gay, and married to a chap. Marianne has never really accepted it ,or him as being gay. You must have seen the inside of the house. All those crosses and pictures of the Virgin Mary.'

'Are they Catholic?'

'They were always Catholic, but after Jessica vanished Marianne turned to her faith, started attending mass every day. Became quite militant.'

'Does Toby live locally?'

'No. Edinburgh.'

'So Marianne and Martin aren't divorced?'

Nancy shook her head and winced again, 'No, she's always refused to grant him one. So, he's gone off let her keep the house and he lives in Spain. He's a millionaire now, that's why Marianne has stayed in that big house after the divorce, I think he makes sure she's taken care of. She just rattles around it all day. It's like she's Miss Havisham. Although unlike Miss Havisham, Marianne always pushes the Hoover round. The place is spotless.'

‘What does Martin do in Spain?’

‘He builds holiday homes for rich ex-pats. Makes a fortune. Lives in Malaga with a younger woman and two small kids.’

Erika was pleased the line of traffic was inching forward. Nancy was a goldmine of information.

‘Do you know how Martin and Marianne met?’

‘In Ireland. He’s Irish, Marianne is British but she grew up in Galway. She met Martin when they were in their late teens, at a youth club I think. She fell pregnant at seventeen, and they had to marry. It was in Ireland in the late seventies. They had a tough start, but he worked his way up on the building sites and then they made the move to London in 1987 just after Jessica was born. They did it at the right time, made a packet during the property boom. Laura was fourteen when they moved, and I think it was tough for her. She had to leave her friends and her home in Ireland.’

‘Is that when the problems began with her?’

Nancy pulled a face, then winced, again remembering she was bandaged. The traffic was now moving faster, and they inched their way through a set of traffic lights, and they moved past the vast gothic red brick Victorian building of

‘Yes. She’d go out all night and not come home, there was a new boyfriend every week. I think she found it tough to find her feet when they moved here, and their life changed. When she was growing up they were dirt poor, it wasn’t until Laura, Laura was in her late teens that Martin started making money. They were rich enough to buy Jessica and Toby all the toys, they joined so many after school clubs. Jessica did ballet... She was such a pretty little thing, Jessica. The press only really used that one photo of her in the dress. It sort of defined the investigation. Marianne has hundreds of photo albums with pictures of Jessica. There’s a little room upstairs in the house, like a cupboard, and she has shelves full of those albums, and there’s just enough room for a chair by a window...’

The traffic inched forward, past the closed shops on Catford High Street. Only a West Indian supermarket was open, and beside it a betting shop. Through the condensation of the brightly lit window, they could see a group of old men stood around peering up at a screen.

‘Do you really think you’re going to solve it, after all these years?’ asked Nancy.

If Erika had any doubts, she wasn’t going to share them, ‘I always solve my cases,’ she said.

‘Well good luck to you... Just watch out. She went mad, that copper who was on the case before, Amanda Baker.’

‘How did she go mad?’

‘Well, she’d been signed off sick before she even took the case. Years in vice, dealing with rape victims got to her. And then with the Jessica case she was so full on, obsessed. She stopped sleeping, and I don’t want to cast aspersions, but I think she was drinking. It was a difficult enough case with all that. Do you know the ins and outs?’

‘I’m working to catch up as fast as I can.’

‘It didn’t help that there were no witnesses. Jessica left the house that afternoon to go to her friends birthday party, and it was as if she vanished off the face of the earth. She never arrived. No one saw anything... The prime suspect was Trevor Marksman, a local sex offender. He lived in a halfway house in Hayes. They found photos and some video he’d taken of Jessica, a few weeks previous, when she was in the park with Marianne and Laura.’

‘And they arrested him.?’

‘They did, but he had an alibi. Cast iron. He had to sign and out of the halfway house. And on the 7th of August, he was there all day. Didn’t leave. But everything else led to it being him. He had a previous conviction for abducting a young girl from the park and taking her home. Luckily that time, the police swooped in and the girl was unharmed... Amanda had no choice but to release him. They kept surveillance on him and then she got frustrated

and started to harass him. He was a nasty piece of work. Enjoyed riling her up. But she went too far and tipped off a group of local women, vigilantes, and one night they shoved a bottle full of petrol through his door. He survived, with hideous burns.'

'And it came back on Amanda?'

Nancy nodded. 'A fancy lawyer took up Trevor Marksman's case. He sued the MET and won substantial damages. Amanda was given early retirement, more than she deserved really, but her legacy is that she's a bent copper. And the last I heard is that she's virtually dead from cirrhosis of the liver... ooh, take the next left...' Erika was disappointed that the journey had come to an end. She pulled off the main road and the traffic was moving normally. They passed a large pub and some Kebab shops before the street became residential. 'This is me, the flats.'

There was a gap in the row of terraces, occupied by a drab squat concrete block of flats. Erika pulled up by the kerb.

'Thanks for the lift. I'm going to take one more of these strong ones with a nip of something,' she said undoing her seatbelt. Erika nodded. Nancy unbuckled her seat belt and opened the door. It was still raining hard. She winced as she pulled up her hood, catching the edge of the bandage. She stepped out of the car.

'Who do you think did it? Who do you think killed Jessica?' asked Erika leaning over to peer out of the passenger door.

'God knows... maybe someone snatched her and drove away, never to be seen again.' said Nancy ducking down adding, 'If Jessica vanished, the person who did it would have to have vanished into thin air too. Thanks again.' She slammed the door and darted off up the path to the main entrance. It was a grotty block of flats, the concrete cladding stained with rainwater. Erika watched for a moment as she fumbled with her keys and let herself in.

Her answer troubled Erika... *vanished into thin air.*

It was late when Erika arrived back at Bromley Station, and she was impressed to find her team still working.

She'd been assigned one of the large open plan offices on the top floor. Several officers were on the phone and raised an eyebrow or a hand in acknowledgement. Two officers, DC Knight and DC Temple were working to assemble the evidence from the historical case files on whiteboards running the length of the back wall. A huge map of South London and the Kent borders dominated one corner and beside it were photos which included Hayes Quarry and 7 Avondale Road. A picture of Jessica Collins dressed in her party outfit was juxtaposed with a photo of her skeleton laid out in the mortuary. Another photo showed the brown tattered remnants of her clothes after years underwater.

'How are we doing?' asked Erika moving over to them. Knight was a tall angular woman with a blunt dark fringe, and Temple a head shorter with pleasant blond boyish features.

'We're just putting a timeline together, Jessica's movements leading up to August 7th and then when she left 7 Avondale Road,' said Knight blowing her fringe out of her eyes and pushing a pin into the map. 'We're working from the original missing person report and all the statements.'

‘Who’s this?’ asked Erika picking up a yellowing photo of a thirty-five year old man with pale blue eyes, greasy blond hair and a beaky face.

‘Trevor Marksman, the convicted kiddy fiddler. We’re including him in the timeline as he was seen watching her in the days leading up to her disappearance,’ said Temple. ‘Although, this is what he looks like now.’

He sifted through and found a picture of a man with hideous burns to his face. He stared straight into the camera, and pain was etched in his eyes, now deep set under skin grafts and he had no hair, eyebrows or lashes.

‘Don’t say *kiddy fiddler*. It makes a joke of something horrific. Sex offender, paedophile. Okay?’ said Erika. DC Temple’s cheeks flushed red and he nodded. ‘This is good work though, do you think this will be ready for tomorrow morning?’

‘Yes, Ma’am,’ said Knight.

‘Call me Boss, please.’

‘Yes, Boss.’

John came through the door with a takeaway box and a cup of coffee. He moved over to his desk by the door, put down the take away box and opened it stuffing a load of chips in his mouth. ‘Hi Boss. Chip?’

‘No,’ said Erika, waiting.

‘Sorry boss,’ he said through a mouthful of chips. I haven’t eaten all day...’ he swallowed them down with a gulp of coffee. ‘You’ve had a couple of messages from Superintendent Yale, asking for the report on Jason Tyler.’

‘Shit, I forgot about that,’ said Erika looking at her watch. It was coming up to ten pm.

‘We’ve also had the official autopsy report through from Dr Strong, I put it on your desk.’

‘Where is my desk?’

‘In your office.’

‘I’ve got an office?’

‘Up the back there,’ said John. Erika turned and saw the large glass box at

the back of the open-plan office. It was crammed waist high with white and grey boxes. She moved over to the door and John followed. In the middle of all the boxes she could just make out a desk.

‘Are these all the files on the Jessica Collins case?’

‘Yes, Boss. Arrived this afternoon from the Specialist Casework Investigation Team. And they carry on under the window there.’

There was no space to move beyond the doorway. The autopsy report was in the middle of her desk.

‘Sorry, Boss. The files were delivered after I put the report on your desk,’ he said putting down his chips and tackling the stack of boxes in the doorway, pulling them out to make a small gap. Erika joined in as they shifted boxes outside. She looked around at the cramped office, nearly every desk was full and occupied. ‘Shit, there’s no space for any of this.’

She slid another box out through the glass doorway, and managed to squeeze in to reach the chair and reach the report on the desk.

‘And this is everything?’

‘So I’m told. The Specialist Casework Investigation Team sent everything over that’s been in storage, it goes back years and in no particular order. There’s evidence bags mixed up with files, some boxes are marked in date order from 1991 up to 1995, and then some are marked up with the names of locations, and then there are a load with no label at all where files have been stuffed in with no regard...’

A phone rang from inside Erika’s office, and she moved through the boxes to pick it up. It was Marsh.

‘What have you got from the historical case files?’ he asked without preamble.

‘I’ve just got them.’

‘Are you putting together a list of suspects?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d like to see it as soon as possible.’

‘I had a chat with DC Greene who was the family liason on the case. She gave me a good insight, but I need more manpower to get through this stuff,’ said Erika.

‘Ok, I’ll see what I can do. Did you see the papers?’

At the same time John handed her a slightly rain splattered copy of The Evening Standard, and she saw that it had made the front page of the evening edition.

‘Yes, I’ve got a copy. I see they’ve gone with the same picture of Jessica Collins.’

‘Yes, for some reason they forgot to include the incident room number. But Colleen Scanlan is on it, and they should be adding it to the online edition any minute now.’

Erika looked up at her team, many of who were flagging sat at their desks. Marsh went on,

‘Martin Collins is flying into the UK late tonight with Laura and Toby. They’ve asked for a meeting with the SIO and media liaison.’

‘I was planning to meet with the family...’

‘Martin Collins wants assurances that this case will be dealt with properly, after the fiasco it turned into last time.’

‘Well I hope if you’ve spoken with him you’ve made those assurances?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good, and I’ll re-iterate them.’

‘Erika, we need results on this one.’

‘At the same time I’m untangling a web here, Sir.’ Erika went on to briefly what she’d earned from Nancy, the added, ‘I need to do some more digging, and I’m serious about more manpower. We need to work through these files fast. Then I can start giving you list of suspects.’

‘Ok, leave it with me,’ said Marsh and he hung up.

Erika was bleary eyed when she arrived at Bromley Cross the next morning. She'd stayed late finishing the Jason Tyler report and working through some of the the Jessica Collins case files, and had only grabbed a few hours sleep.

When she got out of her car in the underground car park, she heard a whistle and saw two familiar faces coming toward her.

'Boss! Bloody good to see you!' cried Detective Inspector Moss. She was a small compact woman with short red hair tucked behind her ears, and her face was a mass of freckles. She rushed forward and grabbed Erika in bear hug.

'She's very excited to see you,' said the tall black officer joining them a moment later. It was Detective Inspector Peterson, cool and handsome in a sharp black suit.

'Okay. I can't breathe,' said Erika laughing. Moss broke free and took a step back.

'I thought you'd forgotten about us, Boss?'

'It's been crazy. I was re-assigned here as a spare part and suddenly, they piled me high with cases,' said Erika, feeling guilty that she hadn't kept in touch with her former colleagues.

‘Go on Peterson, give the Boss a hug too,’ joked Moss. He rolled his eyes.

‘Good to see you, Boss he grinned,’ he leaned forward and gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder.

‘Do you need parking permits?’ asked Erika.

‘Just one, we came in my car, Peterson’s waiting to be assigned a new one.’

‘It died on the Sun in The Sands roundabout last week,’ he said. ‘Total nightmare, the middle of rush hour, I was due back at the nick. There was cars honking like mad, smoke coming out from under my bonnet.’

‘You should see the bonnet, Boss he looks really good in it. I told him not to wear it today. Although it quite suited him...’

‘Piss off Moss,’ said Peterson.

‘He’s just being modest, Boss. The frills framed his face... Made him look like a baby Idris Elba.’

Erika burst out laughing. ‘Sorry, Peterson,’ she said.

‘S’alright,’ he grinned. She had forgotten just how much she enjoyed working with Moss and Peterson, and how much she’d missed them. They reached the lift at the end of the car park, and she pressed the call button.

‘Its good to have you both here thank you. Although, I don’t think we’ll be laughing much more today. This case is going to be tough.’

THE INCIDENT ROOM was full when they arrived, and Erika introduced Moss and Peterson and was pleased to see that she’s been assigned six additional CID officers to work on the case files. DC Knight then stood to take them through the timeline of events leading up to the disappearance of Jessica Collins.

‘How much do you want me to explain about location, Boss?’ she asked, looking at Moss and Peterson and the other new members of the team.

‘Imagine we know nothing. We don’t live near Hayes. We’ve never heard of Jessica Collins. We are all hearing this for the first time... And remember,’ Erika added standing and addressing the incident room. ‘There are never any stupid questions. If you don’t understand something, shout.’

She sat back down, and DC Knight moved to the giant four metre square map on the back wall,

‘Okay so this map covers an area of twenty miles from top to bottom. In the centre is central London, and the bottom of the map, down south is the Kent borders, and here we are in Bromley Cross,’ she said indicating a large red cross on the map. ‘And we’re 2.6 miles from Hayes village. It’s a popular commuter belt village, lots of people who live there work in the city of London. It takes thirty minutes to get into the centre of London by train, and it has a higher than average population of retired people. Property prices are high, and it’s a predominantly white demographic area...’

Knight then nodded to DC Temple who turned off the lights. She moved back to a laptop activating the projector, which shone a larger scale map on a blank square of whiteboard. Knight moved to one side of it and went on,

‘This is a larger scale map of Hayes Village. You can see the high street here in the centre, and where the houses thin out to the north it becomes Hayes Common. The common is an area of woodland and heath, crossed by bridleways and footpaths. It’s one of the largest areas of common land in Greater London, at 225 acres. There are multiple access points to the common that can be accessed from Baston Road, Baston Manor Road, Five Elms Road, Croydon Road, Prestons Road, Warren Road, West Common Road and Commonside. At its southern end is the disused quarry where Jessica’s remains were found. The quarry was created between 1906 and 1914, when sandstone was excavated. Over the years it has twice been filled and cleared; during the Second World War there was an army base at Hayes common and anti-aircraft guns. In 1980 the quarry was cleared for the second time by archaeologists as part of a wider dig looking for Bronze Age relics.

After this, it was left to fill with water. Bromley council twice put forward applications to have the quarry used for commercial fishing, but on both occasions the idea was overturned as the common is a site of nature conservation interest, and is protected.'

She paused and moved to the other side of the map, the projection of the roads playing over her tired face like arteries.

'I'll now move on to the timeline of events leading up to the disappearance of Jessica Collins. She lived here with her family in 7 Avondale Road, which is less than a mile from the Hayes Quarry, the closest entrance being here on Five Elms Road. You can see the houses on Avondale Road are all detached with large gardens. It's an affluent area. On Saturday 7th August 1990 at 1.45pm, Jessica left her house to go to a birthday party for her school friend, Kelly Morrison, who lived at number 27 Avondale Road. It was only a short walk of around five hundred meters, but she never arrived. The alarm wasn't raised until over two hours later, just after 4pm, when Marianne Collins arrived at 27 Avondale Road to collect Jessica, and saw she wasn't there.'

She nodded at Temple and he went to the laptop and a Google Street view image appeared,

'Here's a view from the top of Avondale Road where it branches off a main road.'

The Google Street view blurred forward in bursts, the image moving past the houses on Avondale Road. 'You can see that the houses are all large, two of three storeys. They're all set back from the street and many of them have high hedges, trees... Here we are passing 7 Avondale Road, the Collins house... and we're moving forward to 27 Avondale Road. I'm trying to get hold of images of the street from 26 years ago, but from the witness statements I've read. As is today, it wasn't possible to see the street from inside most of these houses.'

The Google Street view surged forward past better-appointed houses. A

postman was frozen mid-walk, his face blurred and his hand deep in his mailbag. Further along, a woman was emerging from one of the driveways with a small dog. From the back she had short curly blond hair.

‘Okay, now you can see that Avondale Road curves sharply to the left where it becomes Marsden Road.’ She pointed to a large manor house painted a buttery yellow with a grand pillared entrance. ‘This is now, The Swann Retirement Village, a nursing home, but 26 years ago it was used a halfway house for convicted sex offenders. Its existence wasn’t made public, and it only came to light shortly after Jessica’s disappearance. One of its residents, Trevor Matthews was the main focus for the original investigation. Photographs of Jessica were found in his room on the top floor. And the Matthews house could be seen clearly from his window. He was also spotted by a neighbour hanging around outside their house on the afternoon of August 5th, on the 6th around the same time and on the morning of the 7th. He was arrested on the 10th August. He was kept in custody for questioning, but no evidence, beyond photos he had taken of Jessica was found to link him to her disappearance, ’

‘But now we have a body,’ said John.

‘We have Jessica’s remains, but there is virtually no forensic evidence after twenty-six years underwater,’ said Erika.

Knight went on,

‘All members of Jessica’s immediate family have an alibi. Marianne and Martin were both at home with Toby. An elderly neighbour and her husband popped in for coffee at around 3.15pm, a Mr and Mrs O’ Shea now deceased. They stayed for forty-five minutes until Marianne left with them to go to collect Jessica. Their oldest daughter Laura was a two hundred and forty miles away on a camping trip with her boyfriend in the Gower Peninsula in Wales. They’d left early the day before.’

She looked at the room.

‘The results of a door-to-door weren’t helpful, most neighbours were out

and those who were in had strong alibis. As you saw in the Google Street Map, most houses are blind to Avondale road, we have a two hour period where anything could have happened. There were few tradesmen; there is no post on a Saturday afternoon. Back in 1990 very little of the area was covered by CCTV. No buses travel down Avondale Road.'

A silence fell over the room for a moment before Temple put the lights back on. Erika moved to the front and stood by the map, now faint under the strip lights.

'Thank you or working hard to put this together... And to all of you who worked late. We're having to hit the ground running here with a huge amount of historical casefiles.' She saw how despondent everyone looked.

'However, this should be seen as a positive. The case files could yield much more. We also have the benefit of hindsight. We also have a body. I'd like you to divide the boxes up. DC McGorry will be in charge of this. I'd also like you to pay attention to the role of the SIO on the case, DCI Amanda Baker. I want to know about her background, anything you can find about her personal life and what she's been up to since she left the force.'

'Like a witch hunt?' said one of the CID Detectives, an older officer with balding sandy hair. He had piercing green eyes and was sat back with his arms folded.

'What's your name?' asked Erika.

'DI Crawford. I was a PC on this case back in 1990.'

'Did you request the case or was it a lucky co-incidence?'

'Lucky, or unlucky,' he chuckled. Erika fixed him with a glare,

'So what's your point?'

He sat up and looked a little awkward,

'There's been a lot said about DCI Baker, but I always thought she was dealing with forces from both sides... She had the Collins family criticising her, and she had a lot of the top brass at the time briefing behind her back. It wasn't right.'

‘I’m not here to trash the reputation of one of our colleagues, but she decided to take justice into her own hands with the prime suspect in the case Trevor Marksman. This is what he looked like when he was arrested,’ she said holding up the first photo. ‘And this is what he looks like now.’

There was a murmur of shock when they saw the close up headshot of Trevor Marksman with burns. ‘DCI Baker was instrumental in tipping off a group of local women who put a home made petrol bomb through his front door just over a year after Jessica went missing. He’d just been assigned a council house. He was the only person that came close to being a suspect. We need to re-visit his statements along with everything else in this case, but keep an open mind.’

Di Crawford put up his hand.

‘Boss, I was involved with the search around Hayes Quarry, and the Marine did a thorough search.’

‘When was this?’

‘Must have been in November 1990.’

‘Okay. This is good. So Jessica was kept alive and or killed somewhere else and her body dumped at a later date,’ said Erika.

‘I didn’t have access to anything that went on in the incident room,’ he added. ‘Back then I was just a uniformed PC, full of enthusiasm. Life had yet to sand me down.’

‘I can relate to that,’ said Erika. ‘It’s good to have you on the team. A little bit of continuity with the past... Okay, everyone, I’d like your main priority to be reviewing the physical evidence. Once we get a hold of what’s in all of these boxes we can move forward. We’ll re-convene tomorrow morning for a progress report.’

The room leapt into life. Erika went over to where Moss and Peterson sat near the back.

‘You two are with me. We’re talking to the Collins family this morning and I’d appreciate your insight.’

A vondale Road was quiet when they approached number seven. The bare hedge was tall, and the front of the large house could be seen clearly through the branches. In the driveway were two large Range Rovers.

A handsome indian man answered the door. He was in his early thirties, and dressed smartly in a black suit. His long black hair tumbled down his shoulders and he smiled warmly. Erika introduced them and they showed their ID's.

'I understood that this was just the family meeting with us?'

'I'm Tan, Tanvir Jindal. I'm Toby's partner,' he said. He had a soft Bradford accent, which made Erika warm to him.

They made their way through the hall and into the living room where the family waited awkwardly. Marianne sat at the end of the long sofa next to the fireplace. She looked pale and drawn. Next to her sat an attractive dark-haired woman in her forties. Heavily made up with tanned skin, and wore tight white trousers, a silk blouse with a tiger print pattern, a black jacket and lots of gold jewellery.

'This is my daughter, Laura,' said Marianne. The woman stood and shook hands with the officers. Erika noticed her brown eyes were bloodshot and detached. A tall lean man with pretty features, sat in an armchair beside the

long sofa. He was fashionably dressed in jeans and a checked shirt with short messy blond hair. He introduced himself as Toby.

In front of the bay window, where the long wine coloured curtains were drawn tight, a middle-aged man paced up and down. He was handsome, and bald with a deep tan, and wore a white shirt and pale jeans on his slim frame. His fingers were covered in gold rings. This was Martin Collins.

‘Hello there,’ he said. His voice still had a strong Irish accent.

Seeing the rest of the family was a shock for Erika, they seemed so colourful and vital in comparison to Marianne. In her black a-line skirt and long grey woollen jumper, she seemed just as faded and dated as the furniture.

‘Please, take a seat,’ said Marianne. She indicated three high backed dining chairs in front of the sofas. Erika, Moss and Peterson sat.

‘Would you all like some tea, perhaps?’ asked Tanvir.

‘That would be very kind,’ said Erika.

‘You don’t know where anything is,’ snapped Marianne.

‘He can use a kettle, and no doubt the cups are still in the same place, above the microwave,’ said Toby. Tanvir hovered awkwardly by the door.

‘Yes, tea would be great,’ said Moss giving him a smile. ‘And we need to talk to the family.’

‘Let me make the tea,’ said Marianne.

‘He’s not contagious, Mum,’ said Toby.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know what I mean. Over ten percent of the population is gay. There’s a high chance gay people have made your clothes, packed your shopping in the supermarket...’

‘Enough!’ snapped Martin. ‘Let Tan make the bloody tea!’ Marianne, pressed a scrunched up ball of tissue to her face. Laura leaned over and gripped her hands.

‘Sorry about this, officers,’ added Martin.

‘It’s fine,’ said Erika. ‘I know this must be a difficult time.’

Martin waited until Tan had left the room and said,

‘Hear that, Toby. A difficult time. Today was supposed to be just family. I wanted us to all be together for once without...’

‘How can you say that, Martin? We’ll never *all* be together. How could you forget Jessica!’ cried Marianne.

‘I didn’t mean that. Do you really think I’ve just forgotten about her?’ shouted Martin. ‘You don’t have the monopoly on grief... Christ almighty. We all grieve in our own way...’

‘Don’t you dare take the lord’s name!’

‘Dad,’ said Lara.

‘No. I’m not going to be told again that I’m not crying enough, that I’m not doing it right!’ he moved over to the sofa and jabbed a finger in Marianne’s face. ‘I loved that little girl, and I would move heaven and earth to spend just one more minute with her, to have her here with us... to have watched her grow up over the past...’ his voice broke and he turned away from them all.

‘Look, we don’t want to intrude on you any more than we need to,’ said Erika. ‘We just need to talk to you and then you can discuss things as a family.’

Martin moved back to the curtain and motioned for Erika to continue. Laura was now crying, along with her mother, and Toby stayed resolute in his chair. His arms crossed over his broad chest.

‘Thank you for all coming here. I’d like to assure you that this investigation will benefit from all our resources, and a great deal of officers are working tirelessly to find who did this.’

‘Don’t give me corporate bollocks,’ said Martin. ‘Speak like a human!’

‘Okay, Mr Collins. We’ve inherited a complex case. When Jessica disappeared twenty-six years ago there were few witnesses. We have to go back and pick through the original investigation, which as you know had

many flaws. I've solved two historical abduction cases, and I've hand picked the best officers to work with me. I know many people have already given up on Jessica, but I'm not one of them. I'm going to catch this bastard. You have my word.'

Martin looked between Erika, Moss and Peterson, and nodded.

'Okay, well I'll hold you to that,' he said, his eyes beginning to fill up. He turned away and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit up. 'You look like a woman I can trust.'

'Are you going to screw her too?' said Marianne. There was silence. 'Did you know? He was screwing that whore of a detective, Amanda Baker.'

A look passed between Erika, Moss and Peterson.

'Marianne...' started Martin.

'No, Why should I be quiet? He was sleeping with that woman. A woman who comforted me, who I told private things to about how I felt.'

'It was a year after she joined the case!' shouted Martin.

'And that makes it okay?'

'And I'm supposedly the one in this family who every one is ashamed of,' said Toby, almost as an aside to Erika, Moss and Peterson.

'Shut up!' cried Laura. 'All of you. This is about Jessica! My... Our sister, she never got to grow up, she should be here! And all you can do is bicker and fight!' Tears ran tracks down her cheeks, through thick foundation and she wiped at it with the back of her hand.

'It's alright my darling,' said Marianne.

'When can we see her?' asked Laura.

'You do realise that when we found Jessica, we recovered just her skeletal remains,' said Erika.

'I still want to see her!'

'I would like to see her too,' said Marianne.

'So do I,' said Toby.

'Of course, that can be arranged. I was going to tell you that you will be

able to start making arrangements for a funeral in the next week or so. When the Forensic Pathologist is finished, and Jessica's remains will be returned to you.'

'What are they doing to her?' asked Laura.

'He's running tests, trying to get as much information as possible to put together a picture of how Jessica died.'

'Did she suffer? Please, tell me she didn't suffer,' pleaded Marianne. Erika took a deep breath,

'Again, we still need to run tests. Issac Strong is one of the best Forensic Pathologists in the country, and as well as this he is very respectful. Jessica is safe in his care.'

Marianne nodded and looked up at Martin. He had his back to them, his head bowed. The cigarette had burned down in his hand.

'Martin, come here, love,' she said. He moved to the sofa, sat on the arm next to Marianne and buried his head in her neck giving a deep muffled sob. 'It's okay, it's all right,' she said placing her free hand on his back and pulling him tight to her. Laura turned into her mother too and they sobbed.

'I hardly remember her,' said Toby with tears in his eyes looking up at Erika, Moss and Peterson.

Tanvir returned with a tray of tea and placed it on the large coffee table. Erika just wanted to leave this oppressive house with its dingy furniture. It felt like a museum, and coupled with the terrible atmosphere, the pictures of the Virgin Mary took on a sinister melancholy.

'We'd like to make a fresh media appeal, and wanted to ask if you would be willing to do that, as a family?' asked Erika. They nodded.

'Our media liaison can advise on when and how that happens.'

'Do you have any new suspects?' asked Laura.

'Not as yet, but we are working with new information.'

'What's that?' asked Laura sharply.

'Well, the obvious one being that we found Jessica in Hayes Quarry. Can

I ask what you know about it? Did you spend time there as a family or with Jessica?’

‘Why would we go down to that old quarry? Jessica loved dancing, and going to pets corner...’ said Marianne.

‘I used to go fishing there,’ said Toby. ‘When I was twelve or thirteen... Oh Jesus. She must have been down there. I went out on a boat. She was there all the time.’ Tanvir sat on the arm of his chair and took Tony’s hand. Marianne saw it, and then looked away. Then Peterson spoke for the first time,

‘I know this is hard, but whose boat was this? Who did you know who had access to a boat?’

‘My friend, Karl. It was a rubber dinghy,’ said Toby. ‘But me and Karl were thirteen when we went fishing, I was four when Jessica went missing.’

‘What about Trevor Marksman, eh?’ said Martin looking up and wiping his eyes. ‘That nonce who the council seemed to think it was okay to put in a bloody halfway house at the top of our road! Have you got people talking to him? The only reason they never got that bastard is because there wasn’t... Because Jessica wasn’t found. Have you seen the photos he took of her, and there’s video, *video* from when she was at the park with Marianne and Laura!’

‘He is first on our list of suspects, and he will be brought in again for questioning,’ said Erika.

‘We wrote to our local MP, asking if there could be an inquiry into the first investigation you know what she did?’

‘I don’t,’ said Erika.

‘She sent back a fucking template letter. Didn’t even have the courtesy to put pen to paper. I employ secretaries for my building firm who don’t have much more than the basic qualifications, and even they know to give a proper handwritten response, but an MP? Do you know that to be a Member of Parliament you need no qualifications whatsoever...’ He was now pacing up

and down the living room watched by Marianne, Toby and Lara. 'What qualifications do you have? Marksman got himself a fancy Barrister and legal aid, and sued you all for, what was it, almost three hundred grand?'

'What happened with my predecessor was regrettable,' said Erika. As she heard it come out of her mouth she knew it would anger him even more.

'Well, I've got money, I don't need legal aid, and did you know that Laura's boyfriend is now a pretty shit hot Barrister himself?'

'Dad,' said Laura shooting him a look.

'No. Charlie is a partner at the Omnia Chambers, and he's already said he's ready to work for me!'

'This is Charles Britton, he was your boyfriend at the time of Jessica's disappearance?' asked Moss.

'Yes, he was,' said Laura wiping her eyes.

'And you were both camping in Wales when Jessica vanished?'

'Yes. We came home straight away when we heard. We saw it on the news...' her bottom lip began to tremble.

'What happened between you and Charles?'

'We were teenagers. He's married now with kids, I'm married with kids, but he's kept in contact. That kind of thing gives you bond.'

Erika could see Martin was now pacing up and down, and red in the face, 'Jessica's killer has been fucking running around laughing for the last twenty-six years, cos you lot, you useless fucking lot have done nothing! You've let stuff slip through your fingers! How could she just disappear? She only went up the bloody road, it takes no time at all and NO ONE SAW ANYTHING!!!'

With that he flipped up the coffee table and the cups and plates went crashing to the floor.

'Please you need to calm down, Sir,' said Peterson moving over to Martin. Moss got up with him.

'You don't tell me to calm down! You don't come in to my house...'

‘It’s not your house anymore, Martin!’ screamed Marianne, ‘And you don’t get to come back here and wreck things.’ She knelt on the floor and began to pick at the large slivers of broken china.

‘Mum, you’ll cut yourself,’ said Toby softly kneeling down with Marianne and gently pulling her hands away. Laura helplessly between her brother and mother, her father pacing up and down, red in the face.

Martin started kicking at the wall. Marianne screamed at him to stop.

‘Mr Collins, if you don’t calm down right now I’ll have to cuff you and put you into a police car,’ said Erika. ‘Do you really want that to happen? There is press outside and they want nothing more than to find a new angle, and the guilty father will play right into that...’

This brought Martin up short and he looked at Erika.

‘So you are going to calm down, please?’

He nodded, chastised, ‘I’m sorry, he said rubbing a hand over his head.

‘I can’t begin to imagine what this has been like for your family,’ said Erika.

‘It ripped us to shreds.’ He started to cry again and Marianne moved to comfort him, followed by Toby and Lara. Tanvir stood to one side watching with Moss and Peterson.

‘Okay, I think we’ll leave it there. You need to spend some time together. We will be going over all witness statements again, and we may like to talk to you about certain aspects. One of my officers will be in touch,’ said Erika.

She signalled to Moss and Peterson, and they left.

After their meeting with the family, Erika, Moss and Peterson sat outside 7 Avondale Road in the car.

‘That was terrible,’ said Erika.

‘And all still so raw after all these years,’ agreed Moss.

‘You’d expect it to be, Marianne is still living in the same house. Jessica went missing, well, just here,’ added Peterson. They looked out of the window at the street lined with huge bare oak trees, their branches reaching up above them against the grey sky.

A few photographers had arrived, and were sussing out the house. One started to make his way down the drive so Erika briefly activated the blue lights and siren. He jumped back, noticing their unmarked car. Erika left the blue lights on as she put a call into the station asking for a uniform officer to come down to the house.

‘What do you think about Martin having had an affair with Amanda Baker?’ asked Peterson.

‘The Family Liaison never mentioned it when I gave her a lift the other night.’

‘Would she have known?’ said Moss.

‘Maybe not... Did you think Martin was a bit theatrical in there?’

‘What do mean?’ asked Peterson.

‘There was just something hoky about that whole flipping up the tea tray. If he’d thrown something, or... I don’t know, hit one if us I would have expected it. This case seems to get more complicated by the minute,’ said Erika. She looked up at the street and undid her seatbelt, adding, ‘Let’s take a walk.’

They got out of the car and came to the top of the driveway.

‘Any comments?’ asked a journalist with a thick beard, carrying a camera. He had one eye on the house at the bottom of the drive.

‘Yeah, get back away from the driveway. On the pavement,’ said Erika. He rolled his eyes and took a couple of paces back.

They walked off in the direction of number 27. It sloped up slightly and the houses to their left were lower than the road, each driveway sloped down. On their right the houses sat on a bank, so the driveways led up.

‘So we’ve got all these houses, shrouded in trees and shrubs on both sides,’ said Erika.

‘That’s it, we’re here,’ said Moss. They came to a stop outside number 27. It was a cream coloured two storey house with faux pillars out front. The driveway had just been resurfaced and drops of rainwater clung like mercury to the unblemished surface.

‘The house has its second lot of new owners since 1990,’ said Moss. They stood for a moment and looked up and down the street.

‘The halfway house where Trevor Marksman lived at the time is just up here,’ said Erika. They carried on climbing for a few more minutes, and came to where the road turned sharply to the left. A large three storey manor house sat on the other side of the road, nestled in the crease. It was painted a buttery yellow, and its window frames and the pillars out front gleamed white. There was a white painted swing sign on the manicured lawn and large black letters told them this was now The Swann Retirement Home.

They turned and were afforded a clear view of the whole street sloping

away, past number 27 and down to their car parked on the kerb and the photographers who had grown in numbers. A large black crow landed on the sign. His coat gleamed like the painted letters and he let out a mournful cawing. It was the only sound on the street and it echoed.

‘That’s it. It took us less than four minutes to walk here.’

‘Whoever did it must have had a car,’ said Peterson. ‘And might not have taken her far, Hayes quarry is less than a mile away.’

How could she just vanish?’ said Erika.

‘She did just vanish,’ said Moss. The crow cawed again, as if in agreement.

‘What now, Boss?’ asked Peterson.

‘I think we should pay Amanda Baker a visit.’

‘This can’t be right,’ said Erika as they pulled up at an end of terrace house. The small front garden was an overgrown mess, and a greying coat of paint was peeling from the sash windows. The street was quiet, and it had just started to rain.

‘Should we have called ahead? She is one of us, or was,’ started Peterson as they opened the gate.

‘She stopped being one of us when she took the law into her own hands with Trevor Marksman,’ said Erika grabbed an old rusting knocker and rapping on the door. They waited, but there was no answer, she knocked again, and after a moment went to the grimy front window and peered into the living room. She could make out a television in the corner of the room, which was on, and showing one of those auction shows. She jumped when a pair of hooded eyes appeared, framed by long greying hair. The woman inside jumped also, and shooed her away with a hand half covered in a long woollen sleeve.

‘Hi, I’m DCI Foster,’ said Erika quickly retrieving her ID from her coat and pressing it open against the window. ‘I’m here with two colleagues, DI Moss and DI Peterson. We need to ask your advice about the Jessica Collins case...’

The face leaned in and peered at their ID.

‘Do I have to speak to you?’ she shouted through the closed window.

‘No. But we’d like to talk to you about the case, it would help us to hear your thoughts...’

The face moved back, thought for a moment,

‘Go round and I’ll let you in,’ she said.

They came back out through the front gate and walked alongside a mildewing fence, which curved around the end terrace. They saw the hand over the top at the far end and then one of the panels swung inwards.

Former DCI Amanda Baker was a large woman; she had on black crocs with thick woollen socks, and black leggings. She had a bloated red face, and a large double chin. Her grey hair was long and greasy and tied at the nape of her neck with an elastic band. She nodded at them and turned as they followed her down a dank little alleyway, past a bathroom window where a small vent twirled lazily, puffing out the aroma of urine and toilet cleaner. The back garden was overgrown and sacks of rubbish were piled up in one corner.

They came to the back door and Amanda wiped her crocs on a thin scrap of mat, which Erika thought ironical, as it was the kind of house where you wiped your feet on the way out. The kitchen had once been quite smart, but it was filthy and crammed with dirty dishes, and old newspapers. There was a dog bed by a washing machine on spin cycle, but no dog.

‘Go through to the front room. Do you want tea?’ she said with a gravelly smokers voice.

‘Er, yes,’ said Erika seeing Moss and Peterson’s faces at the mess. They moved through a hallway, past a steep wooden staircase leading up to a gloomy landing. The hallway was crammed with old newspapers, and they were piled chest-high against the front door.

As they came into the living room there was a knock at the front window. Erika went over and the postman was outside holding up a sheaf of letters.

Erika opened the window and took them from him.

‘That answers my question about the front door,’ said Peterson. The living room was crammed with two saggy sofas, a dining table and chairs. The television sat in a large shelving unit dominating one wall, and crammed with books and paperwork; there was one picture on the wall which stood out. It was in a cheap gold frame with a braid pattern. The colour photo was a little spoiled and faded at the bottom where the damp had got inside. A thin young version of Amanda Baker wore the old uniform of the WPC; thick black tights, a skirt, jacket and peaked cap. Her black hair shone from underneath and she stood outside Hendon Police College with a young male officer in uniform, he wasn’t wearing his cap, but had it under his arm. They held up their badge’s and were grinning at the camera.

‘I thought you’d make a beeline for that,’ said Amanda, shuffling in with a tray full of steaming cups of tea.

‘I recognise him,’ said Erika taking a cup from the tray and peering back at the photo.

‘PC Gareth Oakley, as was. We worked in vice back in the seventies. Me and Oakley were the same rank then. You now know him as retired Assistant Commissioner Oakley.’

‘That must have been interesting, being a woman in vice, in the seventies?’ said Moss. Amanda just raised her eyebrows.

‘Looks like Oakley he had less hair then, than he does now! How old was he?’ asked Erika peering closer at the picture at his thinning hair.

Amanda chuckled, ‘Twenty-three. He started wearing the syrup when he got promoted to the DCI rank.’

‘That’s Assistant Commissioner Oakley?’ said Moss, just catching on.

‘We trained together at Hendon, graduated in 1978,’ said Amanda. She cleared off some of the newspapers from the sofa and invited them to sit.

‘Oakley has only just retired, massive golden handshake,’ said Moss. It hung in the air for a moment. They all sat down.

‘Okay, so we’re just here informally to ask you about the Jessica Collins case. I’ve been assigned it,’ said Erika.

‘Who did you piss off?’ chuckled Amanda darkly. ‘It’s a poisoned chalice. I always thought they’d dump her in the quarry... although we searched it twice and there was nothing, so whether they kept her somewhere, or moved the body. That’s your job to find out.’

‘You were convinced it was Trevor Marksman?’

‘Yeah,’ she nodded holding Erika’s gaze. ‘He burned for it though. And you know what? I’d do it again.’

‘So you freely admit you tipped off the people who put the petrol bomb through his door.’

‘Yep.’ She looked at Erika, Moss and Peterson, adding, ‘don’t you ever want to take justice into your own hands?’

‘No.’

‘Come on, Erika. I’ve read about you. Your husband was gunned down by that druggie, plus four of your colleagues and he left you for dead. Wouldn’t you love to have an hour in a room with him, just the two of you and a baseball bat covered in nails?’ She blew on her tea and kept eye contact with Erika.

‘Yeah I would.’

‘There you go then.’

‘But I’d never do it. Our job as police officers is to uphold the law, and not to take it into our own hands. You also had an affair with Martin Collins?’

Amanda sighed and put her tea down on the coffee table. It was littered with rubbish.

‘I did. Him and Marianne were over, it was two years after Jessica went missing. We got close. I regret that more than Marksman, but I fell in love.’

‘Did he?’

‘No.’

She shrugged and pulled a pack of cigarettes from a pouch in the front of her jumper and lit up.

‘Did anyone in the MET know?’

‘They knew. But I was off the case. I often think it was the only good thing I did for that family. I couldn’t bring their daughter back, I made Martin forget, at least when he was with me.’

‘Now we’ve found Jessica. Do you still think Trevor Marksman did it?’ asked Erika.

Amanda took another drag of her cigarette. ‘I always think that if something is so bloody obvious then it has to be true... He had someone working with him though, and I think that when he took her. He kept her somewhere.’

‘You had him under surveillance?’ asked Peterson.

‘We did, but there was a week or so in between her going missing and us getting eyes on him... But then the first officers I had working on it were a couple of poofs. Turns out they used their night time watch to cop off a few times and fuck each other. I was never able to prove it, but they probably missed a few opportunities to catch him.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘I confronted them, they were thrown off the case. They started gossiping about me. Spread a lot of shit about me...’ she took a drag on her cigarette drawing it right down to the filter, then lit it with another.

‘I had a look at your file,’ started Erika.

‘Oh you did, did you?’ said Amanda squinting through the smoke.

‘After the Jessica Collins case, you were moved to the drug squad, and you were charged with selling on cocaine.’

‘Everyone was doing it. It was the nineties. They threw the book at me, no one else got done for it... I was in debt.’ She sniffed and crossed her arms defiantly.

‘You know what the drug problems are like in London, I don’t know how

you could do that?’

‘Oh stop bleating... I was a bloody good copper. I paved the way for women like you, feminist DCI’s and little dyke DI’s,’ she added indicating Moss. ‘and you, DI Peterson, you would have been the token black guy twenty years ago, now you’re accepted, taken seriously.’

‘So it’s all down to you is it? Are you the Rosa Parks of the MET?’ said Peterson.

‘And I can call myself a dyke, not you,’ added Moss.

‘There we go, you’ve arrived in the force, haven’t you?’

There was an awkward silence. Erika gave Moss and Peterson a look.

‘We’re not here to do anything more than get your side of things.’

‘My side?’

‘Yes, what it was like working on the case, your insight. I’m coming to this blind with reams and reams of case files.’

Amanda was quiet for a moment and lit another cigarette,

‘When I worked in vice I was the only woman and I was given every rape case, I looked after those women. I took samples, I cared for them. I never ignored their calls and I supported them through months of waiting whilst the fuckers who raped them were on remand. The I held their hand through the court cases... No one gave me any support. They say that you fall in love with the force but it doesn’t love you back and that’s true. The blokes who used to piss off down the pub early, who used to demand free fucks from the sex workers, they got the promotions. And then when I finally get the Jessica Collins case, I was made to feel like I’d overstepped the mark, had ideas above my station.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said Erika.

‘Don’t be sorry. But don’t judge me. You get to the point when you find out playing by the rules gets you nowhere...’ she indicated the photo on the wall with the butt of her cigarette, ‘Look. That arsehole Oakley, ended up as Assistant Commissioner,’ she stubbed it out in an overflowing ashtray,

grinding it down. 'We were on the beat a lot together in the old days. One night we were on Catford High Street at three am, and this lad holds us up at knifepoint in one of the side roads. He was off his head on something... he grabs Oakley and presses the knife against his neck, and Oakley shits himself. I'm not talking metaphorically, he actually shits his pants. The kid with the knife, who's paranoid and wired enough as it is, freaks out at the smell, thinks he's shit himself and runs away... Oakley was saved by his own shit. It's ironical that years later, he gets a bloody MBE for his work in the force bringing down knife crime... I helped him that night, got him cleaned up and I kept my mouth shut. We were tight back then. Years later when it all went wrong for me, he was Chief Superintendent I think. He did nothing, left me out to dry.'

They sat in silence for a moment. The clock ticked loudly, a car went past on the road outside and the sky seemed to have grown darker.

'There is something,' said Amanda. She paused and rubbed at her face. 'Hayes Quarry. There's an old cottage beside it. When we searched the area there was an old guy, a squatter living there. He let us search the place, twice. It's tiny with a cellar. We found nothing. Of course. Then a few months later he hung himself...'

'And?' asked Erika.

'I dunno. I was gung-ho for Trevor Marksman's scalp, but I've had time to think since you found Marianne in the quarry.'

'It was Jessica who we found.'

'Yeah, that's what I meant, who I meant. There was just something odd about it. He didn't seem to type to do that.'

'Do you know his name?'

'Um, no I forget.'

'Did you know him well?'

'Course not. But he was just a bit simple, happy go lucky simple. That stood out for me. Then for him to go and drink poison and then hang

himself.'

'He drank poison too?'

'Yeah, I just said that.'

'You didn't,' said Peterson. They could see that Amanda's hands were now shaking badly.

'Fuck it, well he did. I need a drink,' she said. 'Anyone else?'

'No, thank you, we won't take up any more of your time,' said Erika. 'Is it okay if I call on you again. We're working our way through all the evidence and there may be something I need to run by you, or clarify.'

'Can you get me on the payroll?' she joked with a wheeze. There was an awkward silence. 'That's fine. Call on me whenever you need to. As you can see, I've got all the time in the world.'

AMANDA WATCHED from her dingy front room window as the three detectives went back to their car and drove away. She thought the two women were a little annoying, but the black guy was pretty hot. She attempted to close the front window and keep out the cold. It didn't shut properly, and she hadn't bothered to do much about it. The only person who ever came with any regularity was the postman. She flicked through the letter, seeing it was all junk and a bill from the council.

She didn't notice the old blue Ford parked a little way down the street, and the man inside who was watching her. He had dark hair and several days stubble. She hadn't noticed him the day before either, when he'd parked further up the street and walked past her house, paying attention to the broken window. She took a gulp of the wine, moved back over to the sofa and settled down to drink herself into oblivion.

Erika had discussed what Amanda Baker had said with Moss and Peterson, and they had chewed over her confusion about some of the facts of the case. They'd presumed much of it was fuelled by anger, paranoia, and the booze. But what she had said about the cottage beside Hayes Quarry had stuck, so the next morning she came back with Peterson.

They parked at the Croydon Road entrance to Hayes Common in a small gravel car park. It was a cold morning and they buttoned their coats as they got out and started to walk toward a bank of trees at the top of a slope, following a gravel path. The path took them to the left side past the trees and then the path swerved to the right, blocking out the car park, the view of the houses and road, and it opened out to rolling common land.

'Jeez, how quickly you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere,' said Peterson as the trees muffled the sounds of the road. Their feet crunched on the gravel as they moved past tall bare trees on either side, set so close together that the woods inside were dark. 'This is where I imagine eyes watching us from the depths of the wood,' he added. The grass was coated with dew from the night before, and the sun hadn't yet risen above the trees to evaporate it. A low mist hung in the air, and wisps floated past as they walked.

‘What if she was carried this way, Jessica?’ said Erika. They absorbed that thought as their feet crunched along the gravel path.

‘Was she wrapped in the plastic before she went in? Or did whoever it was, do it by the water?’

‘Whoever did it had a walk to get to the quarry. This Croydon Road entrance where we’ve parked is the closest and we’ve been walking for,’ Erika checked her watch, ‘five minutes.’

‘Maybe it wasn’t just one person,’ said Peterson plunging his hands in his pockets deep in thought.

The trees on either side seemed to part as the gravel path curved round, and slightly below them, sat the quarry. The still water reflected the grey of the sky, and the low mist hung over its surface. The gravel path finished a hundred yards from the water, and they walked across spongy uneven moss to reach its rocky banks.

‘Whoever did this would have needed a boat,’ said Erika. ‘She was found about a hundred yards out.’

Peterson picked up a small stone, crouched down and skimmed it across the water.

‘Six, that’s impressive,’ she said as they watched the row of ripples spreading across the water.

‘No one would have been able to throw a small child’s body that far from here on the shore,’ said Peterson. They moved off, their legs as well as their minds working in synch. The path around the quarry was thin in places, and in between there were rocks to clamber over and small gnarled trees, some with their branches hanging into the waters edge, to duck under.

‘Okay, I can’t see the cottage,’ said Erika. She pulled out a map she’d been emailed by the council.

‘In twenty six years trees would have grown up and...’ started Peterson.

‘Hang on,’ said Erika as they came level with a mass of overgrown brambles and reeds. ‘That’s a rooftop, isn’t it?’ she said pointing at a slice of

red tile rising up through a mass of brambles and dried bindweed. They approached the mass, which as well as being sharp and thick in places, was slick with dew. Now they were closer, Erika could see broken glass glinting in the pale light. They started to make their way through, but the metres of brambles trees and dense undergrowth were impenetrable.

‘Jeez boss, we need to be better prepared for this; backup, some gloves,’ said Peterson, wincing as he pulled a large bramble from the soft skin on his thumb.

‘You’re right, we need this cut down,’ said Erika reluctantly. They came back out from the soggy undergrowth brushing themselves down, just as a yellow Labrador bounded up with a soggy tennis ball in its mouth. It stopped and sat, placing its paw on the ball.

Erika picked it up and threw it for the dog and it bounded away across the mossy grass. Just as it loped back with the ball, a woman appeared through the trees. She was dressed in an eccentric array of clothes; a saggy old green tracksuit, a Chelsea FC bobble hat, a Manchester United scarf, a pair of purple trainers, where one of the soles was detached and flapping. She had a carrier bag bursting with what looked like walnuts and her hands were stained black from the walnuts husks. From under her hat spilled tangled wiry grey hair, and her face was deeply lined.

‘Serge, heel,’ she snapped. She spoke with a refined yet phlegmy upper-class voice. The dog ran to her side and she peered at Erika and Peterson.

‘Hello, I’m DCI Foster,’ said Erika holding out her ID, ‘This is DI Peterson.’

‘It’s perfectly legal to *glean* walnuts,’ she started. ‘What the bloody hell does it need two of you out here?’

‘We’re not...’ started Erika.

‘Bloody police were called when someone was picking blackberries from the hedgerows, you heard about that? I mean *really*. It belongs to God, and he puts it all on earth for us to eat.’

‘We’re not here about Walnuts or anything that you might be picking...’

‘There’s no *might*, I *am* picking Walnuts, I’ve picked. Look!’ she said opening the carrier bag. It was full of walnuts, some still in the green and black husks.

‘We’re investigating the death of Jessica Collins, you may have seen something about it on the television,’ said Erika.

‘Haven’t got a television,’ said the woman. ‘But I listen to Radio Four. I heard the news. Nasty business. You found her over yonder,’ she added tipping her head toward the quarry.

‘Yes. Have you lived around this area for long?’

‘I’ve lived here my whole life, eighty-four years.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Peterson, but all this got in return was a scowl.

‘What can you tell us about the cottage there, in the undergrowth?’ asked Erika. The woman peered past her squinting, creasing her face even more.

‘Second World War, accommodation and storage for the air base they had here, all quite hush hush. I think someone stayed on after the war, but then it was empty, it’s been empty for years... Old Bob had it for a long time, unofficially, though not long enough to claim squatters rights, the poor bastard.’

‘Do you know where he is now?’ asked Erika, phishing for more information.

‘A few years back. They found him in there, dead,’ she said tilting her head toward the cottage.

‘Do you know what his name was?’

‘I told you, Old Bob.’

‘His legal name?’

‘Bob Jennings.’

‘And what’s your name?’ asked Erika.

‘Why do I have to give you my name? You don’t need my name for me to answer questions.’

Erika sighed feeling they were going round in circles.

‘There are few, if any witnesses to the death of Jessica Collins. She was only seven when she was dumped in the water. Her body lay weighted down in plastic, and left in the silt for twenty-six years. We don’t know if she was still alive when she was thrown in...’

The old woman was taken aback.

‘The poor child...’

Peterson stepped forward and gave her his winning smile, ‘We may have more questions, ma’am. It could be beneficial to us to use your extensive knowledge of the area to help us in our investigation.’

She peered up at him for a moment, then said to Erika,

‘Is he flirting with me?’

‘No, of course not,’ said Peterson embarrassed.

‘I hope not man! Is that your idea of police work?’

Erika stifled a grin saying, ‘We have an uphill struggle to get to the bottom of this murder case, any local knowledge will be of great use to us...’

The old lady’s faced creased even more as she gave both of them the once over,

‘I’m the honourable Rosemary Hooley. I live at the old vicarage. I don’t have a telephone, but I’m almost always at home.’

‘Thank you,’ said Erika.

Rosemary whistled at the dog and strode off, the labrador following after her. They watched as she disappeared round the bank of trees, the sole of her shoe flapping.

‘Flirting...’ muttered Peterson. ‘She’s flattering herself.’

Erika pulled out her phone and called in to control asking them to find out when they could about a Bob or Robert Jennings. When she hung up they stood looking out over the water.

It was so still and peaceful.

‘To think she was here all this time, less than a mile from home,’ said

Erika.

After three days watching Amanda Baker's house, the dark haired man with the stubble had worked out that her routine was both predictable and pathetic. His name was Gerry, or G to his associates. He saw that she stayed in all day, but made a trip to the local off-licence mid-morning to pick up some wine and shop for that evening's food.

He'd also hacked into her smart phone. He'd dabbled in a lot over the years; a stint in the army, but it didn't agree with him, organised crime a bit over computer hacking. He was tall, dark and well built, and had the ability to both shine and gain people's confidence, and when needed he could blend in the background.

It was easy to hack her phone, a cheap Android model, and he'd easily obtained her number from the electoral register. The previous day, in the early hours of the morning, he'd sent a text message containing a malicious code. Once it had arrived it had acted as a Trojan Horse, she didn't even have to open it, he was able to gain access to her smart phone and delete the message. For the past couple of days she'd been using her handset, unaware that he was inside watching everything she did.

Amanda Baker played a lot of games like Candy Crush Saga, and Jewel. She'd also set up a profile on one of the dating sites using a fake picture of a

blond haired woman in her twenties. He soon realised there was nothing malicious behind it, she just liked chatting to guys, the chatting turning into the kind of sexting where she came across as both needy and horny.

It was her internet searches which had spiked Terry's interest; several times she'd googled the Jessica Collins murder, its wikipedia entry, and searched for information on the Collins family. She had also tried several times to log onto HOLMES the UK police database. She'd had no luck logging in, her access had long ago been revoked, so she had made calls to an officer working on the case called DI Crawford, who was ex-colleague.

Gerry had listened to the calls, and at first DI Crawford had been cold with her, but it became apparent they had a history, they had been lovers, and for a time it had been serious.

She had asked if she could use his login for the HOLMES database, he'd refused her that but he did say he would keep her up to speed with the case. Gerry had reported this back to his boss during a late night phone call, and it was decided that the surveillance of Amanda Baker would be increased.

IT WAS dark and raining when Gerry saw Amanda turn off the lights downstairs. A few minutes later the light came on in the upstairs window. He waited for the light to go out and then left the car. He moved swiftly through the darkness to the front room window. It opened easily and he climbed in. He worked fast, he had two options; conceal a small battery operated listening device in the room, or find a concealed plug for a tiny black box listening device with a SIM card. Using a low watt torch he saw the mess inside the room and moved quickly. The room stank of smoke, but there was a long defunct smoke detector on the ceiling. He used a chair and quickly fitted the small listening device in the plastic housing of the smoke detector. It was voice activated with a battery life of several days.

He flicked off the light and moved into the hallway. The landline sat on

the table, its red charging light glowing in the dark. As he reached out to take the handset from its cradle, the stairs creaked and he froze. He moved quickly and found the doorway to an empty room filled with junk, which was once a dining room, just in time as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

She creaked past him, heavy footed to the kitchen. The light came on, he heard the tap running and a crackle of a foil sheet of pills. The light flicked off and she rumbled past, and back up the stairs.

He came out of the shadows and worked quickly taking the handset apart and inserting a small listening device.

He paused in the hallway. His eyes had grown used to the dark. He noticed just how steep the stairs were. He made a mental note and then left the house through the front window, melting back into the darkness.

Erika slept fitfully, and in her dreams she was sinking down into the freezing dark waters of Hayes Quarry. The moon was full, and as she slowly sank down, the bottom of the quarry stretched out, lit up like a moonscape. She swam along the bottom, her arms and legs numb, her lungs screaming. The silt billowed up around her clouding her view, but then it cleared and her mother's body appeared. She was dressed in the patterned housecoat she wore when Erika and her sister were little, the strings of her apron suspended in the water out behind her, the skin on her face was pale and it flaked away until she dissolved to silt.

She then saw her late husband Mark. His body pale, and still dressed in his police uniform with the bullet proof vest. When she came close his body slowly turned exposing the bullet holes in his neck, gaping like raw dough. She tried to reach out and touch him, and as she sank down into the silt beside him, his body disintegrated.

Through the clouds of grey, she saw Jessica standing on the bed of the quarry, but she wasn't a skeleton. She was dressed for her friend's birthday party; her long blond hair floated around her head like a halo, the material of the pink dress billowed lazily in the gentle undercurrents. Her patterned sandals hovered above the silt. Under her arm she held a wrapped gift, a

small square of black and white polka dots. Erika could now see there were a row of houses on the bottom of the quarry. A light shone in one shimmering through the water. When Erika reached Jessica, she was close to the house with light shining. She turned and smiled at Erika. She tried to grab at Jessica, to pull her up to the surface, but as her fingers closed around Jessica's tiny arm, the skin began to fall away, exposing the bones underneath. The skin then fell away from Jessica's face, exposing the skull and gaping eye sockets.

ERIKA WOKE WITH A YELL, her sheets soaked with sweat, but shivering. It was still dark outside her bedroom window and the clock beside her bed showed it was four thirty am. She got up and took a shower, standing under the hot water for a long time. Trying to warm her bones, which still held the chills of the cold water in the quarry. When the water finally ran cold she dried, dressed in her thick robe and came through to the kitchen. She had been reading through a stack of files John had flagged for her attention, and she made some coffee and sat down with one labelled "AUG 1990 - OCT 1991 AMANDA BAKER".

She read with interest details of Amanda's role the search in the days and weeks after Jessica's disappearance. It began with a door-to-door in Avondale Road, which drew a blank. Of the sixty houses on the street, residents of twenty-nine of them were away on holiday. In addition, the residents of a further thirteen houses were out on the afternoon of August 7th. In the remaining houses, the neighbours who were at home that afternoon saw nothing.

Almost immediately after Jessica Collins was reported missing, DCI Baker had officers conduct a house-to-house on Avondale Road. At first light on August 9th a large team of officers and local volunteers met on Hayes Common and combed the area. They found nothing.

In the following days, Amanda had the front and back gardens of Avondale Road searched, and where earth had recently been moved or dug over, she sent forensics in with a methane probe. On August 13th a probe registered something at the bottom of the garden at number 34. It was the house of a local councillor, Bob Murray. They also discovered that Bob had briefly been at home on the afternoon of August 7th, between 2pm- 2.20pm until his wife returned from shopping. He was well-respected in the local community, but he was one of the few people who couldn't account for the full two hour period when Jessica left home and was discovered missing. Despite protestations that he was innocent, and that twenty minutes was a very small timeframe, the garden of number 34 was excavated. All they found was the body of a decaying cat. A stray that their housekeeper had buried at the bottom of the garden three weeks previously, without their knowledge.

Erika could see there was a complaint letter included in the case file from Councillor Murray, citing DCI Amanda Baker's abrasive rudeness, and that the excavation had caused thousands of pounds damage to their Zen Japanese garden. There had been an altercation between Amanda and Bob Murray's wife Angela, where Amanda had called her a cunt.

A few days later, Amanda had discovered the existence of a halfway house in the next street, and reports were coming in that one of its residents, a convicted paedophile called Trevor Marksman, had been seen outside number 7 in the days leading up to Jessica going missing.

Erika saw that Amanda had then briefed the press on the morning of August 15th, saying that they had arrested Trevor Marksman, adding that he had been living in a halfway house four hundred yards away. A halfway house that had been approved by Councillor Murray and the rest of the council the previous year.

'Amanda, that can't have done you any favours,' said Erika as she read through the file. She hadn't noticed that the cup coffee at her elbow was now

cold. She thought about the way she had dealt with cases in the past, and how she'd made a name for herself as difficult, particularly with top brass.

'But it goes back to the same old thing,' said Erika to herself. 'A man is direct and blunt and he's thought of as decisive and driven, a woman does it and she's a difficult bitch.'

John had included in the file reports relating to Trevor Marksman. He was questioned repeatedly, but it he had an alibi. He had been in the communal television room at the halfway house from lunchtime until early evening on the day when Jessica disappeared. He had several witnesses, including the parole officer who lived in at the time could confirm this.

Marksman's room at the halfway house was searched, and officers found an album of photos he had taken of Jessica. He had a camcorder and several tapes where he had videoed young girls, including several videos of Jessica taken at the park. The halfway house was searched and so were the grounds, but officers found nothing.

The Collins family offered some of Jessica's baby teeth for a DNA comparison, but nothing came back from samples taken in his room, or any of his belongings.

A year later, when the case had gone cold, Marksman had already been moved several times for his protection, when he was relocated to a house in North London. On the night of September 4th 1991 a milk bottle filled with petrol was put through his door. The house burned to the ground, and he was pulled out of the flames badly burnt.

Two women, April Morrow and Kelly Crown had been seen outside his house and were arrested. A search of April Morrow's flat found photocopies of council files relating to the location of Trevor Marksman. The council denied wrongdoing and put the blame on Amanda Baker, saying she had fed them the information. There was no proof either way, but coupled with revelations of a relationship between Martin Collins, and DCI Baker, her reputation was damaged forever.

Erika got up and made herself another cup of coffee, and saw it was just getting light. She hesitated then made a call. Marsh answered almost straight away.

‘Sorry to call so early,’ said Erika.

‘No probs. I haven’t been sleeping much... Marcie wants to work out visitation times for when I see the girls. She’s not happy about me popping in.’

‘Damn. I’m sorry, Paul...’

‘It’ my own fault. I work too much.’

‘Are you busy?’

‘I was just working...’ he said. His voice tailed off. ‘What is it?’

‘I’ve been working my way through the Jessica Collins case files, which confirm the closest they got to a suspect was Trevor Marksman.’

‘Yes.’

‘And it says that Marksman was seen hanging around Jessica and the family in the days leading up to when she vanished.’

‘Erika, he had a cast iron alibi. And you know what the CPS would say about bringing him in after everything...’

‘I don’t want to talk to him as a suspect. I want to talk to him as a witness.’

‘A witness?’

‘Yes, no one saw anything, no neighbours, no locals, nothing. The only person who we know had his eye on her in the days leading up to her going missing was Trevor Marksman. Yes he’s a sicko, but if we put that to one side for a moment, he could also have seen something, heard something.’

‘He never said he did.’

‘Did anyone ever ask him?’

There was a pause on the end of the line.

‘Okay. You’d need to ask him if he’d be willing to talk. I believe he has health problems, he’s confined to his home, and you need to be diplomatic.’

He's sued the MET once before and won, substantially.'

'Ok, I'll get DC Mc Gorry on to it, he's impressed me. He's a good diplomat.'

'Maybe you could learn something from him,' said Marsh.

'Ha ha,' said Erika.

'I'm serious. Don't fuck it up,' said Marsh and he put the phone down.

When Erika arrived at Bromley Station, she came out of the lift on the ground floor and saw a commotion at the end of the hall. A group of uniform officers stood around an old shopping trolley which contained a dummy they'd made for Guy Fawkes' night. It consisted of a comedy policeman's uniform stuffed with old newspaper. The head was a balloon, with a mournful face with large eyes drawn on in permanent marker. It was topped by a policeman's helmet, where a curly red fright wig poked out from underneath. It looked like they'd been stopped by Superintendent Yale, who stood at the front of the trolley and was giving them a bollocking,

'So instead of worrying about the terror alert being raised to Urgent, you've decided to spend your time pissing about?'

'It's for Guy Fawkes, and we're collecting for Great Ormond Street,' said a small female PC dressed in her stab vest and hi-vis jacket.

'What if top brass were to come in and do a spot check?'

'But we're all coming off shift, Sir... We thought if we stayed in uniform we could collect more money,' said another officer.

'Would you have time to explain that?'

Erika reached them, and saw that the Guy slumped to one side in the trolley, with its big eyes and mass of messy red hair had an uncanny

resemblance to Yale.

‘Wasn’t Guy Fawkes a terrorist?’ asked a tall thin officer with a boyish face who had both hands tucked under his stab vest.

‘Do you want a warning?’ snapped Yale. ‘Now get this out of here!’

They turned the trolley and sloped off, the tall officer muttering, ‘Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament, didn’t he?’

‘Good morning, Sir,’ said Erika trying to keep a straight face.

‘Is it?’ he snapped.

‘Isn’t it?’

‘No. It bloody isn’t. Jason Tyler’s legal team are tying us and the CPS in knots. He’s now going back on a deal to reveal the location of computer records unless we press for a recommended suspended sentence.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘I know. Fucking drug dealers...’

Erika wanted to remind him that this is what you get when you start to negotiate with drug dealers, but she didn’t. He shook his head and went off down the corridor muttering.

She took the stairs up to the incident room on the top floor. She was impressed to see that much of her team were already in. It was a Friday, and she was conscious that it was now two weeks since they had discovered Jessica’s body, and that they had been working flat out for seven days. Phones rang and nearly every desk was full. DC Knight was updating a corner of the whiteboard containing all the information, and a profile of Amanda Baker.

‘Morning, Boss, can I have a word?’ asked Peterson, jumping up from his desk and intercepting her on the way to her glass office. He followed her in shoving a piece of a doughnut in his mouth and washing it down with a gulp of coffee. She put her bag on the desk noticing another pile of case files had been prepared for her. ‘I’ve had Laura Collins on the phone for the fifth time in two days. She wants to know when they can start making arrangements for

a funeral?’

‘I haven’t heard anything from Isaac. I thought he’d have been in touch about this. Chase him up, don’t rush him, but find out.’

‘She also asked when her dad can go back to Spain... is there any reason he shouldn’t?’

Erika sat at her desk.

‘Well, no, but I thought he’d be staying here? I’d told them that they could start arranging a funeral.’

‘You think there’s something fishy going on?’

‘I don’t know. But thinking something fishy is going on isn’t good enough. Find out if he can give us a date when he’s coming back, but say it’s because we want to arrange an appeal with the family. See what he says.’

Peterson nodded. Erika went on to tell him about wanting to speak to Trevor Marksman and he agreed it was a good idea. John appeared at the door.

‘Just the person,’ said Erika. ‘Can you put out some feelers, I want to meet with Trevor Marksman, and talk to him as a witness. It needs discretion though, I don’t want the press finding out we’re talking to him, it might scare him off.’

‘Okay, Boss. I was just coming to see you because we’ve had a call from the secretary of an Oscar Browne QC. He wants to meet with you in his chambers.’

‘Hang on, is this Laura Collins’s ex-boyfriend?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Why is he calling me?’

‘He wants to talk.’

‘About what?’

‘He’s asked to talk to you face to face, it’s about the case. I pressed him but he wouldn’t say anymore. Can you do today?’ Erika looked at Peterson who raised an eyebrow.

‘Two o’clock this afternoon. Get the address and get me the file on him. He must have made a statement at the time. He had an alibi though?’

‘He did.’

‘Ok, oh and let me know the second you hear something from Trevor Marksman.’

John went off to fetch the file as she logged onto her computer and saw she had seventy emails about the case.

‘Oscar Browne was away camping in Wales with Laura?’ said Erika.

‘Yeah. Marianne waved them off on the day before Jessica went missing. There’s a statement from a bloke who worked at the site who said they arrived and were staying there. I seem to remember him saying that he was the only black guy...’

‘I suppose people would have remembered him in Wales back in 1990...’ Erika clicked on one of her emails, ‘I’ve got details here on Bob Jennings, the man who had lived in the cottage next to Hayes Quarry. Says he’d lived in the area all his life, and had spent time in and out of various mental institutions in Kent. He had a criminal record, mostly for petty theft, but no history of violence. The council had tried to house him on three occasions but every time he had refused... So that’s why he ended up squatting.’

‘So that’s our main suspect, a dead guy?’ said Peterson.

John came back to the door.

‘You’re booked in to meet Oscar Browne at 2pm.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Look on the bright side, he might confess to it all,’ said Peterson toasting her with his coffee cup on his way out.

Erika sat back and rubbed her eyes. This case seemed to be blossoming out of control in all directions.

The Omnia Legal Chambers were close to Victoria Station, so Erika took the fast train from Bromley, arriving half an hour later. It was a red brick building a few minutes walk from the train station, a few doors down from the Apollo Theatre.

It felt serious. The stern woman on the front desk, the imposing opulence of the reception area of carved stone and moulded high ceilings. She was shown to his office on the top floor, which had a sweeping view of the London skyline. Oscar Browne was eighteen at the time of Jessica's disappearance. He was now 44 years old, a tall distinguished black man with the beginnings of salt and pepper in his hair. He wore an expensive tailored suit and shoes. It was the office of an expensive lawyer, thick rugs, dark polished wood and the all-seeing secretary. Erika imagined she had been carefully chosen, she was not too easy on the eye to distract the male partners, but attractive enough to show the company was young and dynamic.

'Detective Chief Inspector,' he said rising from his desk to welcome her. They shook hands. "Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee, some water?"

'No thank you,' said Erika. She sat on the comfortable armchair in front of his desk and he waited until the secretary had left to speak.

'I was very sad to hear that Jessica's body had been recovered. On the

one hand twenty-six years has gone so fast, on the other it seems like only yesterday.'

'I don't think it's gone quickly for the Collins family,' said Erika.

'No, of course not. Do you have any leads?'

Erika tilted her head and looked him square in the eye, 'I'm not here to tell you if we have any leads Mr Browne. In fact, why am I here?'

'I'm still in contact with the Collins family, and I witnessed at first hand how the previous investigation unfolded. It was distressing and damaging for the family.'

'I'm aware of what happened.'

'I've been asked by the family to act as their spokesperson.'

'But you are a barrister, not a PR?'

'Correct.'

'I'm not sure in what capacity they've hired you. Have they hired you?'

'I don't like the word hired. I know the law, I also know a lot of people. I think the family feel that over the years, and in particular during the first investigation things span out of control. I'm just here for them, part friend, part advisor.'

'I thought you were asking to see me to tell you about your involvement in the case.'

'My involvement?' he sat back and gave her a disarming smile. 'I gave the officer at the time a full statement, along with Laura. We were both away camping.'

'Te Gower Peninsula in Wales?'

'Yes, it's a beautiful part of the country.'

'What made you choose Wales?'

'We were both at University in Swansea. It's quite close. We'd been there with friends the previous Easter, and we fancied a proper trip, just the two of us.'

'Are you still close to Laura?'

‘I wouldn’t say we’re close. Our relationship didn’t last. We split up in early 1991.’

‘Why?’

‘In the September of 1990 we were due to go back for our second year. I was studying law, she was studying Mathematics. Obviously she didn’t return. Did you go to University?’

‘No I didn’t,’ said Erika. It came out with more hostility than she intended.

‘Well, let me tell you, life at University is very insular and intense. I met someone else, she was upset and so was I, but we parted amicably and I was still there for her.’

‘So you dumped her?’

‘I wouldn’t say that. Laura will admit that it was a terrible time, she didn’t know how to deal with it, she...’

‘She, what?’

‘She became impossible to be around. I don’t blame her one little bit.’ He emphasised the last three words with the flat of his palm on the polished surface of the desk.

‘You were away camping in the middle of nowhere. How did you find out so fast that Jessica was missing?’

‘You’re questioning me?’

‘No I’m talking to you...’

He smiled broadly,

‘There was a coffee shop and bar at the campsite. The next day we saw it on the evening news when we were having a drink. We came straight back... As I said, I gave all of this in a statement. The emphasis on this meeting is to inform you that I’m here, fighting the family’s corner, and monitoring things. You have to appreciate that in this modern world life has become much more complicated.’

‘You could have saved me a journey with us doing this over the phone.’

‘I like to meet people face to face, I feel that it helps at the beginning of a working relationship.’

Erika sat back, a little surprised.

‘So, how are we going to be working together?’

‘I’d like you to relay all information about the case through my office. I will pass things on to the family. I have a letter here, signed by the family requesting and authorising me to do this. Another reason I asked to meet in person.’ He handed Erika a letter on headed notepaper. She took it and saw it was signed by Martin, Marianne, Laura and Toby. ‘I don’t expect you to give me regular updates, but when you have information pertaining to the case, or any new information, and when you release Jessica’s remains they ask that you contact me. My number is on the letter.’

He pulled out a sleek black fountain pen, leaned over and underlined the phone number for his office. Twice. Erika could barely disguise her irritation at this. ‘When can we expect that Jessica’s remains will be released?’

‘Forensics are still conducting tests.’

‘Are you able to tell us how she died?’

‘I’ll contact you when we’re able to release her remains.’

He held her gaze for a moment and then offered his hand.

‘I look forward to working with you.’ He flashed her the winning smile, but she didn’t return it and left his office.

ERIKA CALLED in to the incident room on her way back to Victoria Station. Peterson picked up the phone and she angrily told him what had happened.

‘You do realise that the family are completely within their rights to do this?’ he said.

‘Of course they are. But why does this Barrister stroke PR get to summon me to his office?’

‘You did say yes, you could have refused.’

Erika paused outside the station concourse for a moment. 'I know. It just gets harder. It feels like everyone has gone mad. We live in a mad world, and this is coming from someone who's worked in the police for twenty years.'

Peterson laughed.

'I do have good news. Trevor Marksman has agreed to talk to us. And there won't be a lawyer in sight. We do have to go to his place though.'

'When can I talk to him?'

'Today, this afternoon if possible,' said Peterson. 'He's asked that you do it at his flat.'

'What's the address?'

'You're not going to believe this. He lives in a penthouse apartment on Borough High Street.'

Erika took the tube across to London Bridge Station, where she met Peterson. Borough High Street was bustling with tourists, traffic and office workers. The buildings either side rose high and seemed to press down on them. They walked a few hundreds yards, passing under the railway bridge, along side the market where stalls were being closed down for the day, and they came to a large set of cast iron gates.

‘How the hell has Trevor Marksman ended up living here?’ asked Erika peering through to see a glimpse of a cobbled courtyard. Peterson found his flat number and pressed call.

‘He won two hundred K in the civil suit against the MET. Invested it in property, and by the look of it, just before the housing boom,’ said Peterson. There was a crackle and a voice asked them to hold up their ID to the camera. After a moment the huge gates soundlessly swung inwards.

They walked into a large courtyard surrounded by a small landscaped garden. The gates slid closed, and at once they were transported away from the noise of the busy high street.

‘Is he waiting for us?’ asked Erika as they approached a tall red brick tower with a large glass entrance. A tall balding man in a smart suit waited, and was looking at them in anticipation.

‘He has an assistant,’ said Peterson.

When they came level the man nodded curtly. He had pale skin, and a bald shiny head. A pink scar wove its way across his forehead and vanished behind his left ear.

‘Good afternoon officers, may I see your ID’s again,’ he said. He had a clipped South African accent and Erika could see that underneath his suit he carried considerable bulk. They handed over their ID’s and he looked at them carefully, glancing up between them. Satisfied he handed them back,

‘Please come in.’

They came out of a lift onto the top floor. A large black laquered table sat between two doors, and on it was a beautiful white vase with a delicate pattern of roses. Erika thought of the entrance to her own flat, a tiny table covered in copies of the local free newspaper and take away leaflets.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Erika.

‘I’m Joel,’ said the man. His eyes were grey and distant. ‘Please remove your shoes,’ he added as he opened the door. The apartment consisted of a large open-plan area with a beautiful pale blue carpet edged in cream and white roses. He stood over them as they removed their shoes, and Erika noticed how uncomfortable Peterson was.

‘Please come through,’ he said. They moved through the living area which was dotted with pale sofas around a large low coffee table. It was covered in glossy photo books featuring images of young children, one in particular was of a young girl looking up at the camera, and wearing a red swimming costume, she was making a sandcastle on the beach. She had large pale blue eyes and a serious pout. There was nothing illegal about the picture, but it fit into the jigsaw of Trevor Marksman’s life, which painted a more disturbing picture.

The room curved to the left and they came to a man sitting in an armchair by a large picture window. The view was of the Thames, the sky low and grey. A small tug boat was the only traffic on the choppy water, pulling a

long flat barge.

‘Trevor Marksman?’ asked Peterson. The man turned and for a moment Erika couldn’t speak. His head was covered in skin, but it didn’t look like it had always belonged to him. It looked as if a large flat piece had been rolled out, and then carelessly placed over his head. The skin was painfully tight around his eyes, barely affording him eyelids, his lips were non-existent.

‘Please sit,’ he said. He found it difficult to make the plosive ‘p’ sound. He wore loose fitting trousers and a shirt which was open at the neck, where his burns continued. His hands were red raw and claw like and there were only the remnants of fingernails on his left thumb and right index finger.

‘Thank you for speaking to us,’ said Erika. She looked across at Peterson who was staring down at Marksman with real rage. She too felt revulsion, but shot him a look to keep a lid on it and focus.

‘Would you like some tea or coffee?’ he asked. His eyes were cold and very blue, and Erika remembered them from the first mug shot photo taken of Marksman. It was like he was staring out from behind a Halloween mask.

‘Joel, would you pull up a couple of chairs for our guests,’ said Marksman. His voice had a pained hoarse sound. Joel brought two folding chairs, and they sat close together in front of Marksman’s armchair.

‘He was working for the NHS, used to come in every day to help me. I have heart problems, I can barely take two steps these days without having to sit. I poached him, he’s very good. Lives in.’

‘So no more prowling kids playgrounds for you, or does he do that for you?’ said Peterson.

‘We’re aware of your history, but we’re not here to talk about that,’ said Erika giving.

‘I have only ever been accused of one crime...’

‘Abducting and sexually assaulting a young girl, the police broke into your flat as you were about to penetrate her.’

‘I served five years for that and not a day does by when I don’t regret it,’

he replied hoarsely. He started to cough and brought one of the raw claw hands up to his lipless mouth. He motioned for a beaker on a table just out of reach by the window. Erika rose and picked it up, placing the plastic straw in his mouth. The sound of him sucking down on the straw filled the room, until there was a gurgle as he emptied the glass.

‘Thank you,’ he said sitting back. ‘My voice and throat seem never to have recovered from the smoke damage. The doctor said it was like I’d inhaled on ten thousand cigarettes at once.’

He pulled out a tissue nestled in the side of the armchair and wiped at his face. He saw Peterson glaring at him. He put the tissue down and brought his hands to his chest and slowly painfully used his claws to undo three of his shirt buttons, he splayed the shirt open where a beautiful silver crucifix lay against his burnt chest. Erika noticed he didn’t have any nipples.

‘I’ve found Jesus Christ. I have asked him and he has forgiven me. Do you believe in forgiveness, DI Peterson?’

‘I believe in it, but I think there are some things which shouldn’t be forgiven... My sister was raped by our local priest when she was six. He threatened to kill her if she said anything.’

‘The priesthood attracts the best and the worst. Did he repent?’

‘He died on his own terms, natural causes. My sister killed herself.’

Erika realised that Peterson coming was a bad idea. She hadn’t put two and two together and she was cursing her stupidity.

‘Peterson. We’re not here to talk about...’

‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ said Marksman his cold blue eyes staring out from underneath his mask of skin grafts. Peterson stood, his chair tipped back with a crash, and he had Marksman by the shirt collar before Erika could react. Marksman was lifted out of his chair, but he betrayed no fear and hung loosely in Peterson’s grip, ‘What was her name?’ asked Marksman softly.

‘You don’t get to ask her name,’ growled Peterson.

‘Peterson! James,’ said Erika ‘Let him go!’ said Erika placing her hands

over his.

‘We don’t choose to be like this, you know,’ croaked Marksman his head flopping back and forwards. Suddenly Joel was at Erika’s side and he had a powerful forearm wrapped around Peterson’s neck.

‘Let him go. Or I’ll break your neck,’ he said calmly.

‘We are police officers, we need to calm down here,’ said Erika moving to look directly at Peterson.

‘This constitutes an assault and I’d be with my rights,’ said Joel.

‘No one is going to do anything. Peterson let go, and you, take your hands off him,’ said Erika. There was a brief stand off for a moment and then Peterson let go of Marksman who slumped back in the chair. Joel let go of Peterson, but stood close his nostrils flaring breathing down on Peterson.

‘Back off,’ said Peterson.

‘No way mate.’

‘Peterson. I want you to leave. I’ll call you... Go NOW!’ said Erika. He glowered at them all and then left.

They settled back down and when Marksman was comfortable in his chair again, his clothes straight, he motioned for Joel to leave.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said Erika. ‘I came here to ask you questions as a witness, and I expected you to be treated that way.’

He nodded.

‘I’ve looked over your statement and it says you followed Jessica on the 5th, 6th and you were watching her on the morning of the 7th August outside her house.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I was in love with her... I can see you grimace. But you have to understand I can’t control how I feel. I’m repulsed by my desires, I cannot control them. She was a beautiful little girl. I first saw her at the local newsagent with her mother. It was maybe early June in 1990. She wore a

blue dress and her hair was in a matching blue ribbon. Her hair was luminous and she was holding her little brothers hand while her mother paid the newspaper bill. I remember he was pulling faces and she kept laughing. It was like music.'

'Okay. How did they seem, as a family?'

'Happy go lucky. Although...'

'What?'

'Twice I saw Jessica with the mother and the sister...They were out at the local play park a few minutes from the house. Jessica was playing and they were sat at a bench having rows.'

'What about?'

'I don't know. I couldn't hear from where I was.'

'Where was that?'

'There was a bench on the opposite side of the park.'

'And you took pictures of Jessica?'

'And some video too. I won a camcorder, in a competition at the Co-op...' his eyes lit up and for the for a moment he smiled at the memory. His skin crinkled upwards as one pulling his eyes tighter.

'It got quite vicious on one occasion. Marianne slapped Laura across the face. She also used to slap Jessica on the legs quite frequently. But I suppose it was a long time ago. These days people would be shocked, back then it was usual to slap your children. And those Catholics know all about meteing out corporal punishment.'

'Laura had just turned nineteen, and her mother slapped her around the face.'

Marksman nodded and then rested his chin on his chest, the scar tissue bunching up like crepe paper.

'She slapped her mother back, gave as good as she got.'

'What happened to those videos and photos?'

'They were seized by the police. They were never returned to me. I don't

know why, it's just video of a park.'

'Did you see anyone else suspicious?'

'Apart from me? God, I don't know. There was that local loon, Bob Jennings.'

Erika sat up, 'What was he doing?'

'He was a council gardener. Bit slow, so they got him cheap no doubt. He was there a couple of times clipping hedges. He was harmless though, they questioned him, but nothing came of it. I always thought it was of his connections.'

'He was a homeless loner wasn't he?'

'Yeah, but from money. He has a sour faced old bitch of a sister. If she's alive, she probably is. The blue blooded ones always go on forever.'

'Who is his sister?'

'The honourable Rosemary Hooley.'

It was late when Erika and Peterson arrived in Hayes. They had joined the rush hour crowds and taken a direct train back from London Bridge. Peterson had been apologetic, but Erika was more excited by their lead.

‘Why didn’t Rosemary mention that Bob Jennings was her brother?’ she said speaking in a low voice. They had to stand, packed in at the back of a crowded carriage.

‘And she knew we’d just found, you know who in the you know where,’ muttered Peterson. A short sweaty man was crushed in beside them with a paper but he was staring. He looked away when they both turned to him.

‘I want to talk to her and I don’t care how bloody honourable she is,’ said Erika leaning into Peterson’s ear.

It was a short walk up from the station. Several lame fireworks whizzed into the sky and popped, and there was a faint smell of woodsmoke.

Rosemary Hooley had said she lived at the Old Vicarage, and it was one of an idyllic line of stone houses facing the west side of the common, by the Croydon Road entrance.

The smell of woodsmoke grew stronger as they opened the low front gate and came into the front garden of the vicarage. The house was thatched, and the front beautifully kept, with a neat mossy lawn dotted with dead leaves

and over looked by two low windows with stone arches. One of the windows was double aspect, and through a cosy little front room, where a fire blazed, they caught a glimpse of Rosemary Hooley stood in the back garden, nursing a small pile of hedge clippings to light. They began to smoke violently. When Erika closed the gate the blond Labrador heard and came bounding round the corner, bowling towards them so fast, and only stopping inches away.

‘Serge!’ cried Rosemary coming to a side gate leading round to the back garden. She saw Erika and Peterson and took a breath,

‘Ah, I thought I’d see you both again. ‘Tea?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Erika. Rosemary pulled off her battered gloves and indicated they should follow.

A GLOSSY GREEN Aga dominated the kitchen, providing warmth and comfort from the cold outside. She crashed about pulling out cups, milk and sugar, and a Victoria sponge on an old willow pattern plate. Erika and Peterson sat awkwardly at a small wooden table covered in old copies of the Radio Times, a car radio with wires hanging out of the back, and a bowl of blackening bananas. Two scrawny cats were asleep in the middle, and Erika could see one had a huge tick on the top of its head.

Rosemary came over with milk and sugar. She picked up the first cat; tossed it onto the floor where it landed shocked on its four paws. She picked up the second greying cat with the tick and in a swift movement twisted it out. She let the cat drop to the floor and held the tick up to the light of the window between her knuckles.

‘There, you see, you have to get it out with all the head intact.’ She held it toward Peterson, it’s black hair-fine legs wriggling and he turned away looking queasy.

Rosemary moved away to the sink and dropped it down the plughole, activating the garbage disposal with a roar. Erika noted she didn’t wash her

hands as she poured them tea.

‘So. Dead girl at the bottom of the quarry... Bad business... Very bad,’ she said taking a slurp of her tea. A little dribbled down her chin and she wiped it with the back of her sleeve.

‘We asked you about the house by the quarry a few days ago,’ started Peterson.

‘Yes. I was there, I remember.’

‘You said that a man squatted in the house... Bob Jennings. Why didn’t you mention that he was your brother?’ asked Erika.

‘You never asked!’ she replied bluntly.

‘We’re asking now. And we’d like all the information. The quarry is now a murder scene, and your brother was living beside it,’ said Erika. Rosemary took another gulp of her tea and looked a little chastised. ‘How long did your brother live in the house?’

‘Years, I don’t know eleven years... As I said the poor bugger was only a few months off being able to claim squatters rights. And then he died.’

‘When?’ asked Erika.

Rosemary sat back in her chair and thought for a moment, ‘it would have been 1981 until 1991...’

‘And when did he die?’

‘He passed away in the autumn of 1990.’

‘Can you be more exact?’ asked Erika.

‘I suppose so, hang on...’ she got up and went through to another room where they could hear drawers opening and papers rustling.

‘The quarry was searched three months after Jessica went missing, so that would have been November 1990,’ said Peterson.

‘Ah I have it here,’ said Rosemary coming back through to the kitchen with a piece of yellowing paper. She slid it across the table and they saw it was a death certificate.

‘This says he passed away on 28th November 1990,’ said Erika reading.

She scanned down the document. 'Cause of death was by hanging.' She looked up at Rosemary, adding, 'I'm so sorry.'

'My brother was a lost soul. One of those people who slipped through the cracks of society.'

'What was wrong with him?'

'We never had a complete diagnosis. He was my older brother and back then, you just sat at the back of the class as a troublemaker, there were no child psychologists. The only job he held down was a gardener for the council... I tried to have him here with me, but he would sleepwalk, or disappear leaving the door open. That was back when my husband was alive, and our daughter was small. We couldn't have him here. He'd go missing for weeks on end and then he'd appear at the door. I'd feed him, give him money. He went to prison twice for thieving, silly stuff. He'd see something bright and shiny in a shop, fall in love with it, and slip it in his pocket. No malice.'

'I'm sorry to have to ask this, but was he ever a suspect in the disappearance of Jessica Collins?'

At this suggestion, her manner changed completely.

'How dare you! My brother was many things, but a child killer? No. Never. He didn't have it in him and even if he did, he could never have masterminded something like that!'

'I'm sorry to have to ask. Did the police ever talk to him?'

'Well, I don't know, maybe. Shouldn't you be the ones telling me that?'

'As I say, I'm sorry to have to ask this...'

'There was an exhaustive investigation! And you're asking me twenty-six years later?'

'Mrs Hooley, we are asking questions, nothing more. And to be honest, we're not sure why you were so evasive when we spoke to you on the common?'

'Evasive? How was I evasive? You asked me a question, about who lived

in the house by the quarry and I told you that it was Bob Jennings... Why do we all have to act in society like we're at a bloody confessional? I didn't lie to you, I merely answered your question.'

'But you must have heard that it was the scene of a murder?'

'And my brother has been dead for many years. You must forgive me... What do you call it these days, a senior moment!'

'Do you have a key to the cottage by the quarry?'

'No. He was a squatter. I doubt he had one.'

'What did you do with your brother's personal effects?'

'He had virtually no possessions. I gave what he had to the local charity shops. There was a silver St Christopher necklace and it was buried with him.'

'Did you think he was suicidal?'

Rosemary took a breath and her face sagged a little.

'No. It just wasn't in his nature, and as far hanging, he had a wild phobia for things being around his neck. As a child he refused to wear a tie or button his shirt. It was one of the reasons he was uneducated. He was expelled from every school. The St Christopher I mentioned, he wore on his wrist. So for him to fashion a noose and then hang himself...' Her eyes became misty and she grappled for a tissue in her sleeve. Now I think you've taken up more than enough of my time and my hospitality...'

IT WAS dark and the temperature had dropped when Erika and Peterson came out of the gate. They could see Rosemary through the double aspect window, beside the pile of vegetation in the garden which was now ablaze. In her hand she a can of what looked like petrol. The road lit up orange.

'Do you think Bob Jennings could have been our man?' asked Peterson as they crossed the road to the gravel patch where they'd left the car.

'It's possible,' said Erika. She'd told Peterson about the video tapes

seized from Trevor Marksman earlier, 'We need to find those tapes, and see if Bob Jennings is in any of them. It could be a lead, we could use it in an appeal.'

'If he is our man, it would be a record in case solving,' said Peterson. A firework screamed up into the sky and burst with a bang. Lighting up the common, the bank of bare trees, and the darkness filling the trees beyond.

Erika gave her team its first day off in over a week, but despite it being Saturday, she came in to the station to catch up with paperwork and tried to track down the videotapes which had been seized by police from Trevor Marksman. She spent half of the morning going through the case files and then went down to the evidence store in the basement, and spent the rest of the day trying to track down the videotapes. All she had was the evidence number. DI Crawford arrived just as Erika was making herself a coffee using the kettle in the staffroom on the ground floor. He seemed surprised to see her.

‘I wasn’t expecting to see you here,’ he said.

‘I can say the same for you,’ she replied giving him the once over. He was dressed in jeans and a jumper with his coat. She pulled the tea bag out of her cup. ‘So why are you here after having worked seven days’ straight?’

‘I left my mobile behind...’ just as he said it, a phone started to ring in his pocket. He pulled it out and cancelled the call. ‘My second phone,’ he added.

‘I’m just going upstairs,’ said Erika. She left with her tea and he followed her up to the incident room. She put her tea down and busied herself with some paperwork whilst watching him out of the corner of her eye as he searched the floor under his desk.

‘I thought I’d dropped it. But it’s not here.’

‘Okay, well I’ll keep my eye out. What does it look like?’

‘Um, it’s a Samsung. Smart phone, older model with a cracked case on the back.’

‘I’ll look out for it.’

He stood for a moment longer and then left. She waited by the window and watched as he emerged from the front of the station and crossed the road, talking intently into his phone. Making a mental note to keep her eye on him.

SHE LEFT the station just after six, having spent the day in a search which went nowhere. She put a call through to the Specialist Casework Investigation Team, and gave the young girl on the end of the phone the crime number of the evidence, but the girl didn’t fill her with hope when she said she’d follow it up.

She took a shower and went to keep a longstanding engagement she’d been looking forward to. Dinner, with Isaac Strong.

She arrived at his house just before eight. He lived in a smart terraced house, which had an effortless elegance which always made her feel calm. She was planning on staying over so they could drink and put the world to rights. He answered the door in jeans, T-shirt and a blue apron. A delicious smell of roasting chicken mixed with rosemary wafted out.

‘Red or white?’ he said. She held up two bottles of red she’d bought and he peered at them.

‘Not bad, I’ve taught you well. The Chilean is nicer, let’s open it first. We’ll have the second when our tastebuds have ben knocked out by the first!’

‘Cheeky,’ she said. She followed him through to the kitchen which was pale and elegant with a French rustic-theme; hand painted white cabinets, work surfaces of pale wood. He pulled an ice bucket from the heavy butlers sink in white ceramic, where there was Prosecco.

'Let's have something fizzy first,' he said pouring her a glass. She looked around the kitchen and wondered, as she always did if, as a Forensic Pathologist, Isaac deliberately steered clear of stainless steel.

She sat and as he cooked, she told him about her day, weaving in and out of stuff about the case.

'I didn't want to talk shop tonight, but there's something that's come back on the bone marrow sample I took from Jessica Collins,' he said.

Erika put down her glass and her face became serious, 'What?'

He opened the oven and pulled out the tray of roasting potatoes, steam billowed out to the ceiling, 'There were very high levels of a chemical compound called Tetraethyllead present in the sample I took from her right fibia.' He expertly started to turn the potatoes in the oil between two dessert spoons.

'Say that again?'

'Tetraethyllead. It's an organic lead compound, and the ingredient which was added to petrol to improve performance. It's now illegal and it's been phased out of petrol since 1992.'

'When petrol became unleaded,' finished Erika.

'I'm sorry. I know you never get the chance to switch off, but I thought you would want to know,' he said putting the potatoes back in and closing the oven door. He came over to the table and sat topping up her glass.

'Why would so much be showing up in her bones?'

'Obviously I haven't had any tissue or blood samples to work with, but the conditions in which the body was wrapped and left at the bottom of the lake has preserved the bones.'

'She was a healthy young girl and she was eating well, and from what I've read she was a well cared for child.'

'These levels indicate she could have potentially been exposed to high levels of lead petrol before she died, or that it contributed to her death.'

'Which puts more credence to my theory that she was abducted, and kept

in captivity for a period of weeks before her body was dumped in the quarry... It could have been fumes that she was exposed to?' finished Erika.

'That's up to you to find out.'

'I hate it when you say that.'

'Always a pleasure to help,' he grinned wryly. She took a long drink, placed it down and traced her finger over the condensation clinging to the glass.

'What kind of state is a body in after being buried for twenty-six years?'

'Buried how?'

'In a grave, conventionally, in a coffin.'

'It depends.'

'On what?'

'The type of casket, conditions of burial. Sometimes we can see corpses in surprisingly good condition after many years underground. Mahogany lead-lined caskets often slow progress of decay. The cheaper coffins will erode away, leaving the body at the mercy of the earth and the organisms. Why? Are you thinking of digging someone up?'

He got up and went to the counter bringing back a bowl of roasted almonds.

'I don't know. Possibly. I'd have to justify it, obviously. I'd be looking to prove the cause of death.' Erika took a handful and popped them in her mouth savouring the crunch and the sea salt.

'Wasn't the cause of death proved?'

'It was, but this is a slippery case. I think it was wrongly identified as suicide. I have a suspect who died twenty-six years ago... his cause of death was down as suicide, but his sister says it was a surprise that he took his own life.'

'If it involved poison or broken bones, then traces can remain, but after twenty-six years you'd be risking upsetting family members for no reason.'

'He hung himself, that was the documented cause of death.'

‘Okay, well there’s not going to be much to go on for that after all this time. There wouldn’t be much left of internal organs. If the neck was broken I would still be able to see that.’

‘Okay.’

‘Just remember that exhuming anyone, especially after all this time needs to be justified in court, not just on a hunch... And on a completely different matter, are you eating dessert?’

‘I always eat dessert. That’s the only thing I’m sure of right now,’ she laughed.

‘Good, I made these little molten chocolate puddings, and I’ve been dieting all week,’ he said.

Erika took the stairs two at a time up to the top floor at Bromley Cross. She clutched a bulging file of notes, and checked for the fifth time that she had everything in order.

It was early afternoon on Monday morning. It was now more than two weeks since Jessica Collins had been discovered, and she now had to go into a major briefing and give a progress report.

As she came through the double doors and into the corridor, she met Superintendent Yale carrying his *Who's The Boss?* mug.

'Erika, you're looking smart,' he said taking in her black suit. 'The cavalry are waiting; Commander Marsh, Assistant Commissioner Brace-Cosworthy *and* the media liaison with the twitchy eyes...'

'... Colleen Scanlan. I'm sorry they've thrown you out of your office, sir, but Commander Marsh only called to say they were coming an hour ago, to say the Assistant Commissioner wanted to be briefed.'

'Not too hot here is it? You've got sweat on your top lip,' he said. She wiped it away and went to move past him, 'Jason Tyler's henchmen are being rounded up this afternoon. We leaned on him hard. Threatened to take the kids off his wife. He's given us intel on six of his associates, plus access to the Paypal accounts they've been using. Looks like we're going to clean up!'

‘Congratulations, sir. That’s great to hear. Let’s catch up later. Now please excuse me, I must go,’ she said hurrying away. He watched as she disappeared through the double doors,

‘*Catch up later*, eh? You could have stayed on the case you know, taken all the glory. This could have earned you a promotion too,’ he muttered ruefully. He took a gulp of his tea and started down the stairs.

ERIKA KNOCKED on the office door and went in. The Assistant Commissioner sat behind Yale’s desk, in her crisp white shirt. Her blond shoulder length hair sleek, and parted to the left and away from her high forehead. Her pale face was lined and she wore bright red lipstick, so thick and red that Erika imagined if she was thrown against the wall, her lips would stick. Marsh perched on a low table to the left, his eyes were tired and his shirt was creased. Erika figured that he was still estranged from Marcie. Colleen Scanlan the MET’s Media Liaison officer sat to the right, her notes balanced on a sliver of desk. Her eyes flitted between Erika, Marsh and Camilla. She wore a grey sensible suit, and had recently succumbed to a brutally short haircut, as did many women in their fifties. It stuck up in brown tufts.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ said Erika.

‘Do take a seat, DCI Foster. I’ve used this lull in the proceedings to let my coffee cool. It was scalding, don’t you agree Paul?’ she picked up a white takeaway cup and took a sip, leaving a pair of bright red lips on the rim.

‘Yes, they do a good cup of coffee in the train station,’ said Marsh.

‘Yes, It’s a revelation,’ she agreed. Erika could never tell if Camilla was being sarcastic or making conversation. Colleen cautiously took a sip of her takeaway coffee and nodded her agreement.

‘Do sit down,’ said Camilla indicating the chair in front of the desk. ‘Do you have a working list of suspects for me?’ she added holding out a manicured hand, her long red nails wagging in anticipation.

‘I’d like to discuss that first before I commit any suspects to paper,’ said Erika sitting.

‘Oh,’ said Camilla. ‘You’d like us to do your job for you then?’

‘That’s not what I’m saying.’

‘What are you saying? And please hurry up and say it, we all have other meetings this afternoon.’ She had a habit of drenching everything she said with a synthetic politeness, and it put Erika off her stride.

‘In the short time I have had with this case, I’ve identified a possible suspect. Robert Jennings, a loner who was squatting in a cottage opposite the Hayes quarry.’

‘This is good news. Why don’t you want to commit him to paper?’

‘We have a problem.’

‘Which is?’

‘He’s dead. Robert Hooley was fifty-three years old. He died twenty-six years ago, three months after Jessica went missing. He hung himself in the small cottage opposite Hayes Quarry.’

‘And you think he was consumed by guilt?’

‘Possibly. I also suspect foul play, which is my conflict in making him a suspect.’ Erika went on to tell them what Rosemary Holley had said about his suicide, she also told them of Isaac finding high levels of Tetraethyllead in bone marrow extracted from Jessica’s remains.

‘I’ve only made the link to Robert Jennings now we know Jessica was dumped in the quarry. He could have kept Jessica Captive in the cottage opposite. It’s an isolated spot. However, he had no history of violent behaviour, no record, but he was known as the village oddball. He could have also witnessed something, and his death was staged to look like suicide.’

Erika pulled out a photo of Robert Jennings

‘Village oddball,’ repeated Camilla, taking it and popping her glasses on. The thin gold chain swayed as she examined it. In the photo, he had a florid gnomish face, his large nose was bright red and he had a mass of greying dark

hair.

‘What about Trevor Marksman?’ asked Camilla looking up at Erika.

‘He has an alibi. And he wouldn’t have been able to keep Jessica captive without help. We have no evidence he did.’ Erika went on to detail her meeting with Marksman and that she was trying to find the video tape evidence seized from his camcorder.

‘Could these two have been working together?’ asked Marsh taking the photo from Camilla.

‘It’s possible, Marksman mentioned that he saw Robert Jennings working locally as a gardener, even got him on one of his videos made at the park. I’d like to take a team out and look at the cottage, get forensics in there to pull it apart. I’ve looked at the plans and there is a cellar. We never know, there could be some freak occurrence and Jessica Collins DNA could be present. If that happened then we could put forward to have Robert Jennings body exhumed, again in the hope that there is a trace of something. Both are long shots.’

‘Ok... What about the usual suspects? Collins family members; The father? Any brothers? Other males?’ asked Camilla.

‘Jessica’s brother Toby was four when she was abducted. Her father has an alibi for when she was taken. He’s always co-operated, and again he was under surveillance along with Marianne Collins.

Camilla sifted through the paperwork Erika had laid out as she was talking, picking up a photo of Martin Collins. She cocked her head at it,

‘There’s something quite Jason Statham-ish about him... What do you think, Colleen?’ Colleen looked up from scribbling her notes, and got confused as to how she was meant to reply. ‘I don’t know who Jason Statham is...’

Camilla peered at her over the top of her glasses, ‘Are you serious? You work in the media and you’ve not seen the *The Transporter*?’

‘No.’

‘*Transporter 2 or 3?*’ Colleen shook her head, a little panicked. Erika glanced over and saw Marsh suppress a smile.

‘A night in with a Jason Statham DVD always cures me of the blues... He’s quite the charmer, Martin Collins... I can almost see how DCI Baker succumbed to his charms. Almost. Do some subtle digging. Look at what he’s been up to in the last few years. Who he’s associated with. He came over to the UK in 1986 as a contract builder working at Canary Wharf. Let’s check he didn’t get involved in anything too dodgy.’

Erika went on to explain that Oscar Browne was now working as representative for the family.

‘Very good.’

‘And one more thing, it’s come from the toxicology on Jessica Collins remains. There were unusually high concentrations of a chemical called Tetraethyllead in the samples of bone marrow. It’s an organic lead compound...’

‘It was added to petrol to improve performance, making it leaded,’ finished Camilla.

‘Yes, Ma’am. I speculate that Jessica could have been kept captive in the cottage and exposed to petrol fumes. As well as searching the cottage and cellar, we’ll be looking into if there was a power supply at the house or if a petrol generator was used.’

The office was quiet for a moment as they absorbed this.

‘Good work, Erika, but you need to keep pushing forward with this. Keep your investigation pacey.’

‘Very good ma’am.’

‘Okay, Colleen. Apart from not knowing who Jason Statham is, what can you say to all this?’

Colleen sat up, looking flustered. ‘I’d like to move for a press conference with the family in the next few days. Make a fresh appeal for any historical information. People’s memories may be jogged.’

‘Erika, if that lost video footage could be found in time, it could be something valuable to add to the appeal,’ said Camilla.

‘I’ll do my best, ma’am,’ said Erika.

‘Colleen can you make do with Commander Marsh for the appeal? I’ll be away fro the next few days. Perhaps he can give his shirt an iron before he goes on camera.’

Marsh looked down and smoothed at his shirt.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Colleen. ‘I was planning on using the whole Collins family.’

‘Very good. Unity and family values, always play well. I’ll be away, but I’ll be watching.’

WHEN THE MEETING HAD FINISHED, Erika walked with Marsh back down to the underground car park. They chatted for a moment and then she was shocked to see Camilla emerge from the lift wearing full motorbike leathers and carrying her briefcase. She moved to a gleaming sliver and black Yamaha motorbike, slipped her briefcase into a carrier at the back and pulled on a black and sliver helmet and a pair of thick gloves. She flipped up the visor, and swung her leg over.

‘Beats the traffic every time,’ she shouted as the engine roared to life. With a wave she sped off past them and down the ramp to the slip road.

‘She didn’t offer you to ride pillion,’ said Erika.

‘Very funny. Riding pillion would be a promotion... She’s quite a character,’ he said.

‘There’s something quite predatory about her. I can imagine her organising those swinger parties where everyone throws their keys in a fruit bowl in the middle of the carpet.’

‘She’s married to a high court judge,’ said Marsh unlocking his car and opening the door.

‘Then they’re the ones who probably throw the parties.’

‘Get the job done. She doesn’t mess about, Erika.’

‘Yes, Sir. I’ll be in touch about the house search, and next time, iron your shirt.’

He rolled his eyes and got into his car, making a far less impressive exit from the car park.

Early the next morning Erika travelled to Hayes Quarry with an expanded team, including forensics and uniform officers in a convoy of police vans. They parked close to where Erika had been with the Marine Recovery Unit almost three weeks previously. It was a freezing day, and everyone was rugged up in winter gear. Police tape was put up, closing off a large square of grass approaching the quarry, and its perimeter, including the swathe of overgrown land around the cottage.

The first part of the morning was spent clearing away undergrowth and brambles. Council gardeners set to work with uniform officers and the air was filled with the high-pitched whine of strimmers. Erika waited impatiently outside one of the large support vans with Moss and Peterson. Her phone rang, but it cut out as soon as she pulled it from her pocket.

‘That’s the third call like that this morning, a withheld number,’ she said irritably peering at the screen.

‘Marketing bastards, I bet,’ said Moss. ‘I had a spate of getting them every evening when I sat down for dinner. It drove Celia mad.’

‘I’ve had them too,’ said Peterson blowing into his cupped hands with a stream of vapour.

‘Just calls or text messages too?’ asked Erika. ‘I had a blank text

delivered at four thirty. Again a withheld number.'

'I've never had a text message from a withheld number,' said Peterson.

'Yeah all your hotline bling girls leave sultry voicemails,' grinned Moss.

'Piss off,' he laughed.

DI Crawford approached them with a tray of tea, and they went quiet.

'Thanks,' said Erika as they all took a plastic cup.

'All very exciting,' he said pulling a silly face. 'I was here the first time we searched the quarry, in 1990,' he blew out his cheeks theatrically and tipped his head toward the waters edge. 'Makes you realise how fast your life goes.'

'How old are you?' asked Moss.

'Forty-seven in the new year,' he said.

'What about the Cottage? Can you remember it being involved in the search?' asked Erika.

'It was searched, I remember that. But they found nothing, I think they thought it was abandoned.'

'But Robert Jennings was squatting there,' said Peterson blowing on his tea.

'Often with squatters you don't know they're there. They live in squalor, don't they? Hence the term squatter,' He rolled his eyes for Moss's benefit, and went off with the tea tray.

Erika's phone rang again and she saw it was the same withheld number. She let it ring out and then stuffed it in her pocket. Moments later it buzzed to say she had a voicemail.

'What do you think of him?' she said.

'He irritates me,' said Peterson.

'Makes me feel like I've got an extra tit,' added Moss. 'He's always in front of me, asking questions, poking his nose in.'

'It's his job to ask questions and poke his nose in,' said Erika.

'But he never seems to be actively pursuing anything,' said Peterson.

‘He’s got this annoying way of making jokes, always there with a stupid chirpy little know-it-all comment,’ added Moss. ‘I know it’s harsh.’

‘Yes, there’s something about him,’ said Erika. She didn’t mention about him coming back to the station on Saturday. There was a high pitched buzz and the sound of wood cracking, and a large lump of the undergrowth fell away exposing half of the cottage. They turned and watched as more bunches of dead vines were pulled away.

‘It looks in better nick than I thought,’ said Peterson. The chimney stack had collapsed, but the roof looked intact. Most of the windows were broken, but again, the frames remained.

A small unmarked mini bus appeared driving slowly through the gap in the two support vans, and came to a halt. They recognised the tall blond man who climbed out from the drivers side. It was Nils Åkerman, one of the Crime Scene Managers they had worked with before. He spoke perfect English with only a hint of a Swedish accent. His sense of humour could be dark, and even if Erika didn’t always get his jokes, his eyes always shone kindly.

‘I feel like this is a real long shot, Nils,’ said Erika as they all shook hands. ‘Thanks you for coming.’

‘The odds might just be in our favour today,’ he said. ‘My team are raring to go.’ Erika showed them where they could get close to the house in their car, adding, ‘They should be finished up clearing the area soon, so you can get into the front door.’

‘I’ll go in, and we’ll have a good look, and then you can suit up and join us,’ said Nils. He went back to the mini bus and set off again, navigating over the rough ground to get closer to the cottage.

‘Have we had any luck from the utility companies?’ asked Erika.

‘It’s been effectively off the grid for years,’ said Peterson. ‘It does have a water supply, and the person I spoke to at Thames water thinks that it could have had a septic tank. It’s not part of the sewage network,’ said Peterson.

‘Ok. We need to find that septic tank, and then...’

‘Someone is going to have to shovel through the shit,’ said Moss. ‘I dread to think what a thousand gallons of shit looks like after twenty-six years.’

‘It doesn’t work like that,’ said DI Crawford appearing behind them. ‘Any waste will be long gone.’

‘It’s what’s left behind that I’ll be interested in,’ said Erika. ‘You seem to know the most about septic tanks. Can I put you in charge of tracking it down?’

‘Yes, Boss,’ said Crawford. He went off, looking rather sour. Moss suppressed a grin.

As DI Crawford tramped through the undergrowth surrounding the cottage and beyond looking for the location of the septic tank, he reflected on his life. He was an okay copper. He'd worked hard, too hard at times, but he'd never reached the heights he'd aspired to, or felt he deserved. He'd dreamed of reaching the rank of Superintendent, or Chief Superintendent, but his dreams had fallen short and he was still a Detective Inspector at forty-seven.

He'd just come off a case where he had to take orders from a Superintendent fifteen years his junior, and it made his blood boil.

He got on well with his colleagues, but he often used enthusiasm to mask laziness. He did just enough work to get by, to get the job done, and he spent the rest of his time appearing busy. He was also involved in selling drugs seized from the street back to the very people it had been seized from. Not much, and he was always careful to make just enough money on the side for a few luxuries. He hated being the kind of guy no one took seriously, but sometimes it had its advantages.

He'd been involved for a time with DCI Amanda Baker, back when she was hot, he hastened to tell himself. It was she who introduced him to having that extra stream of income, selling on the side, and they had worked together for a time. Then she had been thrown off the case and disgraced, and their

relationship fizzled out. She was always there though, like a thorn in his side, calling in favours and threatening to shop him in. He'd helped her out of several parking fines, and once altered the results of a DUI which would have resulted in her losing her licence.

This, however was serious. She was asking too many questions about this investigation...

His phone rang in his pocket and he pulled it out. He saw that he had moved quite far from the location of the cottage and was now on smoother rocky ground. The phone showed it was the woman herself, Amanda Baker.

'I need your login and password for HOLMES,' she said. There was no hello, or how are you? Or any kind of deference in her tone. She still spoke to him like she did when she was his boss.

'I'm at work,' he hissed, and I've told you I will help with passing on any info, but you will leave a digital stamp if you log into MY account.'

'Crawford, don't piss me about. You've got far more to lose, and anyway, I'd be accessing the case your working on. Stuff you have access to.'

'What do you need it for?'

'I have a hunch. I'm not going to tell you what, but when I do get to the bottom of it, I will let you have it exclusively, and you can take all the glory... maybe you'll finally get that promotion,' she added with a mocking phlegmy laugh.

'Amanda.'

'Crawford, give me the fucking log in, I'm not pissing about anymore...'

He looked back at the officers milling around the cottage, most of the area had been cleared and there was only the whine of one strimmer, clearing a path to the final window. He gripped the phone, turned his back on it all, and with a heavy heart he gave her his login details.

Two hours after forensics went inside the cottage, Nils called Erika, Moss and Peterson over. They suited up outside, pulling on the blue all-in-one paper suits over their clothes, and then the face masks. Nils met them where a long sheet of plastic began a few meters from the front door.

The door opened straight onto the living room, where the floor was littered in broken glass. At first Erika thought was a black and white patterned floor.

‘It’s bird shit,’ said Nils. ‘We’ve scraped a little away at the edges and it’s parquet floor underneath.’

‘Looks quite good. Some people pay a fortune to get a floor like that,’ said Moss.

Above them were rotting beams inlaid in a crumbling plaster ceiling. A sagging lump in the centre of the room was covered in more bird droppings, old newspapers, and broken glass and this was the remains of a sofa. Two of the CSI’s worked intently where they had stripped away a layer of bird droppings from the thinning cushions and were attempting to take samples. Erika realised that any forensic evidence had most probably been obliterated by the birds. In a corner next to the broken window was a table covered in some old mugs, and the remnants of where someone had tried to light a fire.

There were two other places where a fire had been lit; one against the back wall, and one by the front door. Black scorch marks streaked up the wall, and around them were the remnants of drug paraphernalia, slivers of blackened foil, a syringe and bent tea spoons.

‘What about upstairs?’ asked Moss glancing at the sagging ceiling.

‘No one has been up there yet. The staircase has collapsed and we’re not sure how safe it is until we’ve done a structural check.’

‘You don’t want anyone falling through,’ said Peterson.

‘Although, there would be a team, ready to photograph their dead bodies...’ said Nils.

He moved off toward the kitchen, as Moss muttered, ‘Tumbleweed.’

The kitchen was old and just as filthy and caked in bird droppings as the living room. A low counter ran the length of one wall with its doors missing, exposing empty cupboards, save for a couple of old dusty saucepans and another blackened scorch patch. The matching unit of three cupboards had been attached to the wall above the counter, but fallen off and lay in pieces in the middle of the room. The rawl plugs still hung out of the holes in the wall. The light fitting was gone, just a few wires hung from a hole in the ceiling, and there was an exposed beam crossing the length of the room.

‘This could be where Robert Jennings hung himself,’ said Erika.

‘It’s not,’ said Nils. He took them to a tall doorway in one corner of the room, the door lay rotting on the floor in front. A strong lamp had been clipped to the doorframe, illuminating a cramped filthy staircase leading down into darkness. The few stairs they could see were covered in piles of a hard brown substance, and mixed with bird droppings and rubbish.

Nils stepped trough and pointed up with a gloved hand. There was a loop of frayed decaying rope attached to a beam at the top of the stairs. A CSI was up on a ladder, gently scraping away at the piece of rope.

‘This could be from a hanging,’ said Nils. ‘We’re checking to see what we can get. If you mind where you walk, keep to the outside of each step,’

said Nils as they followed him through the doorway and down the creaking stairs.

The cellar was small and cramped and made Erika feel panicky. The walls were a dark brown and clogged in the corners with cobwebs. It had an uneven earth floor and a low ceiling. From above they heard creaks as Nils's team moved across the floor. Bright halogen lights had been set up in opposite corners, and two of the CSI's were on their knees looking intently at where they had dug out some small sections of the soil floor.

'It's bloody warm,' said Moss.

'As we approach winter the soil releases stored heat,' said Nils. As with the upstairs, there were several small scorched areas where fires had been lit, small piles of burnt foil and wood. The soil floor was a light brown and the soil was compact. Dotted around were several large blackened areas.

'These areas of the soil are saturated,' said Nils. He took an evidence bag which was full of soil and handed it to Erika. She put her nose to it and even behind her mask she knew what it was.

'That's petrol,' she said handing it to Peterson. A look passed between the three of them. 'You think he had a generator down here?'

'Could be, but the junkies have been lighting fires too, could be lighter fluid,' said Nils. Peterson passed the bag of soil to Moss.

'I think I've got something here,' said one of the CSI's his voice muffled by his face mask. He turned to them with a small hard object held in a pair of tweezers, 'It was embedded in the soil here.'

Nils was ready with a small plastic bag, and he held it out as it was dropped in. He held the bag up to the light and they all craned to look at the contents

It was a small tooth. There was a moments silence and Erika looked over at Moss and Peterson.

'When we recovered Jessica Collins remains, one of her front teeth was missing... I want this fast tracked with toxicology,' she said trying to keep

her voice even.

Nils nodded. They looked around the dank cellar and shuddered at the thought of being trapped down there.

‘If we can match that tooth to Jessica’s skeleton, then we’re close to solving this,’ said Erika.

At 7.30pm it was dark and cold, and the team had been down by Hayes Quarry for over thirteen hours. After finding the tooth, they had come back up and joined in the search with DI Crawford for the septic tank. The area around the house was overgrown and over the years soil and all kinds of rubbish had been dumped there, on top of which trees and years of vegetation had grown.

Officers had been to Rosemary Hooley's house three times to ask if her brother had used a petrol generator whilst he was squatting in the cottage, but there was no one in. The house was dark. Erika decided they should call it a day, and made a call to her team back at the station to contact Thames Water and see if they could get the location of the tank.

After the CSI's had left, taking with them the tooth they'd found in the cellar, Erika felt they were so close and yet so far. The tooth could be a major breakthrough; it also could be from one of the junkies and squatters who had been in the house over the last twenty-six years.

Erika's phone rang again, the withheld number, as they rode back in the police van to Bromley. She sat in the back with Moss, Peterson, John, DI Crawford and two other CID officers whose names she had forgotten. She was exhausted and rested her head against the window, listening as Moss and

Peterson were talking with John about going for a drink after work.

‘Bromley is not full of townies,’ cried John.

‘Come on! Bromley ticks every townie box,’ said Moss.

‘How?’

‘Okay, off the top of my head. You’ve got a theatre in the town that’s hosting panto this year?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you usually have an ex-soap star or reality TV star headlining?’

‘Yes,’ said John sheepishly.

‘Does it have a large shopping centre with a maze like car park and a whimsical name?’ asked Peterson.

‘Yes, The Glades.’

‘And what’s this pub called everyone is going to?’ asked Moss.

John paused and with a grin said, ‘It’s called Shenanigans at O’hannigans.’

‘I knew it!’ said Moss. ‘Totally townie.’

‘And does Shenanigans at O’hannigans have a special dress code on a weekend for the guys?’ asked Peterson.

John rolled his eyes, ‘Guys have to wear shirts black trousers and shoes, no trainers... Okay it’s a bit townie.’

‘Don’t you worry kiddo,’ said Moss. ‘We’re only teasing.’

‘But do you fancy coming for a drink at Shenans?’ said John. Erika realised he was talking to her.

‘Yeah. I think we could all do with a drink. Does it do a good curry?’ she replied, thinking of her empty flat at home, and the case files lying on her coffee table, taunting her.

‘Boss you’re actually going to come out for a drink?’ asked Moss turning to her surprised.

‘Yes. Is that odd?’

‘You’ve never come for a drink before,’ said Peterson.

‘I haven’t? Well, maybe it’s about time I did.’

‘There’s a four ninety-nine menu at Shenans, they do a good Indian,’ said John.

FOR THE FIRST time in years, Erika went for a drink. They commandeered a large booth in Shenanigans at O’hannigans, up on the top level, which looked down at the huge interior of the bar. The music was loud and just after eight thirty it was heaving with people who’d only popped in for a drink after work, but were well on the way to staying till closing. Erika bought drinks for all her team and along with Moss ordered a Tikka Masala,

‘We’ve been freezing our arses off all day, I needed two of those,’ said Moss sopping up the last of the brownly yellow sauce from the sliver dish with a piece of Nan bread.

‘Celia’s not going to think so when you get in bed with her tonight,’ said Peterson. ‘You’ve had two curries, and two pints of lager.’

‘The portions are tiny. What have you had to eat, anyway? The cod and chorizo platter...’

‘Yeah, I’d like to live to see my retirement,’ said Peterson.

‘Piss off, what do you want? It’s my round,’ said Moss getting up.

‘Look at the arse print you’ve left on the cushion. That arse print predicts you’ll be dead at fifty,’ said Peterson.

‘Who do you think you are, Jackie Stallone?’ said Moss shuffling past them out of the booth and moving over to the bar.

‘Why does she think you’re Jackie Stallone?’ asked Erika finishing her lager. She felt light and relaxed. It was a feeling she hadn’t had for so long. Peterson went on to explain that years ago Jackie Stallone had been on TV, and said that she could predict people’s futures from looking at their arses.

‘Imagine if that were true? What kind of future would she predict from my arse!’ laughed Erika.

‘I’m sure it’s great,’ said Peterson. He looked embarrassed, ‘I meant that your future looks great, I’m sure. Not that your arse isn’t great... Not that I’ve been looking.’

There was an awkward silence as Moss came back with a round of drinks. She took them off the tray and placed them on the table. John came over.

‘Peterson, do you want to double up with me and Crawford and play air hockey?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ he said. He took his drink and gave Erika an awkward smile.

‘This isn’t bad, for a townie bar,’ said Moss taking a gulp of her lager.

‘It has to be the cottage at the quarry,’ said Erika tracing a pattern in the condensation of her glass. ‘Whoever grabbed her had so little time, and there was a window where she could have been kept in the cellar. She could have been buried there first.’

‘And forensics are going to excavate it,’ said Moss. ‘We have to be patient.’

‘I want to talk to Crawford properly tomorrow. The problem when you don’t take people seriously is that you don’t notice them. He was on the original case, and I sort of let it slide.’

‘Don’t beat yourself up, Boss.’

‘If that tooth doesn’t come back as belonging to Jessica, I’m fucked. Even if it does, I have to prove she was killed by a man with no prior violent behaviour, who died twenty-six years ago.’

‘If it was him, think what you’ll be saving the prison service,’ said Moss. They sat and drank their lager in silence for a moment.

‘Sorry, Boss. Wasn’t funny.’

‘That’s okay. We should be trying to unwind for a couple of hours. I’m not much fun.’

‘You’re never much fun, Boss. It’s what I like about you. There’s no pressure to have fun. I can be miserable around you. In fact, you have saved

me from getting a hell of a lot of wrinkles. I look three years younger from lack of smiling.'

Erika laughed.

'Dammit, here come the wrinkles,' added Moss with a smile. Her phone began to ring and she pulled it out saying, 'This is Celia, will you excuse me.'

Erika nodded, and squeezed out of the booth and went to the bathroom, locking herself in one of the cubicles. Sitting on the closed lid of the toilet she took a deep breath. She felt guilty that she was out having fun, when Jessica Collins killer was still out there on the loose. Guilty that she had lost her grip of the investigation. She also felt guilty that Peterson had been flirting with her... Was that flirting? Or was he just being funny? And did she hope that he was flirting?

'You need to get a grip,' she said to herself out loud.

'What?' came a voice from a cubicle further down.

'Nothing, sorry,' she muttered. Erika pulled out her phone and saw the two more voicemails from the withheld number, 'what the hell?' She muttered. She went to listen to them but had no signal. She sat for a few more minutes, listening to the sound of the toilet flushing and the hand dryer whirring.

Her mind went back again to Jessica Collins. She'd be thirty-three if she was still alive. What if Jessica hadn't gone to that birthday party all those years ago? She could have just stayed home. Or left the house a few minutes later...She could be one of those women down in the bar, having fun , playing the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire Machine?* and laughing with her friends.

And then she thought about her past. What if she and Mark had decided to stay in bed the fateful day of the drug raid? Her life would be so different. She'd be out in a bar with him, cosy and safe as a couple. Then they'd go home, and make love and talk about the night out and their day... *I'm a*

widow she thought. *But I'm only forty-four... I could have children, couldn't I? I've heard of women having children in their forties.*

She grabbed at the toilet roll holder and pulled out a wad of tissue, dabbed at her eyes and made her mind up that she was going to go home. Three drinks was her limit.

When she came back out, Peterson sat alone in the booth with their drinks.

'How long was I in there? Did I enter a time warp?' she asked.

'No. John's girlfriend called, asking where he'd got to. Then Celia called Moss, Jacob has a temperature and she's worried about him... then the uniform lot cleared out and went on to The Wetherspoon's. Crawford has only just left, they forgot about him when he was in the loo, poor bastard... I didn't think you'd want to get back and see we'd all gone.'

'Thanks,' she said slipping into the booth from the other side and sitting back down.

'I hope I didn't embarrass you earlier,' he said. He sat back in the booth, his shirtsleeves rolled up and a lopsided smile on his handsome face.

'No, not at all. It was a compliment, and I should have taken it. So thank you. I take it,' she smiled, lifted her glass to him and they clinked. They chatted some more and before long their glasses were empty.

'Would you like another?' asked Peterson.

'No. I should get going. I need to be in early tomorrow. I have to track down that video footage.'

'Good point.'

When they came out onto the high street it was buzzing with people moving between the pubs. They walked down to the train station in silence, where one black cab sat, its engine idling.

'Were you going to get a cab?' asked Peterson.

'Yeah. I'm over the limit.'

'Me too...'

They looked up and down the road. There was no other traffic. The first spots of rain fell, and quickly became a torrent.

‘Are you going somewhere or not?’ asked the driver pushing down his window. He was a miserable looking old man, with wispy grey hair barely clinging to his head. Peterson opened the door and they both got in and sat on the seat with a gap between them.

‘Where to?’ he asked.

‘She’s first, Forest Hill, then Sydenham,’ said Peterson.

‘No you’re first, we need to go through Sydenham to get to Forest Hill,’ he snapped.

‘Let’s do her first, she’s my boss,’ joked Peterson. The old man rolled his eyes.

They rode in silence, the rain hammering down on the cab roof, the darkness slipping past. There was little traffic. Erika stole a glance over at Peterson. For once she didn’t want to be weighed down by life, by grief and responsibility. She wanted to have someone to hold her as she fell asleep. She wanted to wake up next to someone without feeling desolate and alone. Her heart was hammering as the cab turned into Manor Mount and began to climb the steep hill to her flat. The houses moved past so quickly, and then they were there.

‘First stop, and its; gonna cost you double,’ said the driver pulling to a stop. The automatic locks clicked open on the doors.

‘Do you want grab a cup of coffee? I mean coffee in my flat,’ said Erika. Peterson looked surprised.

‘Sure... yes, a cup of coffee would be great.’

They paid the driver and got out, dashing across the car park. Erika could see that the lights were on in the communal entrance and a blond haired woman was inside with some kids.

At the door, she scabbled in her bag for her keys, and Peterson slung his arm round her, pulled her against his body and kissed her cheek. She was

about to turn to him when she heard a voice shriek,

‘Erika!’

The front door opened and a blond haired woman came out. She looked similar to Erika with a pretty Slavic face, and almond shaped eyes. Her blond hair was long, and hung wet down over her shoulders. She wore a long black coat over skin tight blue jeans and a low cut top. She towered over them both in six-inch heels. Behind her, a small dark haired boy and girl hung off an expensive buggy where a baby slept. She grabbed Erika in a bear hug and then stood back.

‘Who’s this?’ asked Peterson, taken aback.

‘This is my sister, Lenka,’ said Erika.

Erika helped Lenka with the suitcases, the buggy, and with getting her niece and nephew into her flat. Through the window of the communal entrance she could see Peterson stood by the kerb in the pouring rain, his suit jacket hitched up over his head, trying to hail a cab. She'd asked him to come in and wait while he called for one, but Lenka was talking to her in rapid-fire Slovak, and then the baby started to cry, so he left with a quick awkward wave,

Her niece and nephew Jakub and Karolina looked very tired. They were five and seven now, and she was shocked to see how much they had grown up. Erika switched on the lights and the central heating, and asked them to go through to the living room, saying she would be back shortly.

She then rushed back out into the hallway and out into the rain, her head down as she ran up the gravel path, the rain pelting down. The pavement was empty, and she could make out the red lights at the back of a cab turning the corner at the bottom of the hill. She stood for a moment, rainwater pouring down her face.

When she got back in the bathroom door was shut, and she came through to the living room where Jakub and Karolina sat on the sofa with the baby in between them. Her tiny hand grasped Karolina's index finger and she was

giving them a gummy smile, wearing a little pink hat with a cluster of coloured buttons sewn on the front.

‘How is little Erika?’ asked Erika.

‘We call her Eva,’ said Jakub regarding her curiously. He sat back with his hands clasped over a Man United football top.

‘Mummy’s on the toilet,’ said Karolina, too shy to look her in the eye.

‘How are you two?’

The kids shrugged, and looked around at the flat.

‘Would you like a drink?’

They nodded. Erika went to the cupboard and found the blackcurrant cordial she had bought for them the last time they had visited. She poured them each a glass. When she brought it to the coffee table, she realised the Jessica Collins autopsy photos had been left out, and she managed to get the file off the table before they noticed. The toilet flushed, and Lenka came back. She looked pale and stressed.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?’ asked Erika.

‘I tried to, I called you, left you messages but you didn’t pick up!’

‘Hang on, have you withheld your number?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s been withheld for a while now,’ she said evasively.

‘I have a job. A very stressful job and I’d appreciate a heads up. Have you seen how tiny my flat is and...’

‘I did give you a heads up, you didn’t answer!’

‘Even if I had answered you didn’t give me much notice!’

‘I’m your sister!’

There was a slurping sound as Jakub took a sip from the glass. Karolina reached for hers and she watched Erika with the wise eyes of an eight year old. ‘Who was that big black man?’ she asked.

‘What? Oh, a colleague,’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Lenka.

‘He’s a police officer, I work with him,’ said Erika. Lenka raised an eyebrow. ‘What?’

‘He had his arm around you. It’s almost ten o’clock...’

‘Lenka. You are the last person who can ask me questions, seeing as your not answering any of mine... Who’s hungry? Who wants Pizza?’ The kids grinned and put their arms up in the air. ‘Good, I’ve got some menus in the drawer.’

They ordered pizza, and then Erika made up the sofa bed in the living room and tidied up whilst Lenka showered the kids and gave the baby a bath. The pizza arrived an hour later.

Erika sat with Karolina and Jakub, whilst Lenka heated up a jar of baby food and fed the baby. They ate hungrily in front of the movie *Tangled* which Erika found on Netflix putting on the Slovak subtitles. After they’d eaten, they quickly dozed off to sleep.

‘I only saw them a few months ago, and already they look older,’ said Erika watching their flushed sleeping faces. Lenka leaned over and pulled a blanket over them.

‘I know, I’m already arguing with her about wearing lipstick. She’s seven...’

‘You can talk, you were putting on make-up virtually when you could walk,’ said Erika. ‘You went from Mum’s tit to Max Factor. Lenka laughed, ‘Are you still smoking?’ she asked.

‘I’m trying out e-cigarettes,’ said Erika. She opened the patio door and saw it had stopped raining. They slipped on their coats and came out into the cold. Erika accepted a cigarette and they lit up, smoking in silence for a minute.

‘Is this your garden?’ asked Lenka peering into the darkness.

‘I’m renting, but yeah. Now are you going to tell me why you’ve shown up in London on my doorstep?’

‘I told you, I tried to ring but you didn’t pick up the phone, or listen to my messages.’

‘I should have listened, I’m sorry, why are you calling from a withheld number?’

Lenka bit her lip, ‘Things at home are tough. I needed to get away. And the kids haven’t seen London in a while.’

‘This is term time. You’ve taken them out of school to come to London in late October? Come on Lenka. And where is Marek?’

‘Marek, um...’ She took another drag of her cigarette and her eyes began to fill up. ‘Marek has had a bit of trouble, with business.’

‘His business being organised crime.’

‘Don’t say that!’

‘What do you want me to say? Mafia? Or are we just going to pretend that he runs the most lucrative ice cream shop in Eastern Europe?’

‘It’s a real business, Erika.’

‘I know it is. And why couldn’t you just both be content with that?’

‘You know what life is like back home. You left all those years ago and you never came back.’

‘Where is Marek?’

‘He’s gone away.’

‘Where?’

‘To the High Tatras. One of the local guys thinks Marek has been stealing from him.’

‘Local mafia guys?’ Lenka nodded. ‘And has he?’

‘I don’t know... he doesn’t tell me anything. Last week he made me change the SIM card in my phone. This morning he told me I had to go, leave until things have calmed down.’ She was now crying, tears pouring down her face.

‘Oh, I’m sorry... come here...’ Erika put her arms around Lenka as she sobbed. ‘You can stay here, no worries. You’ll be safe and we’ll sort

something out.'

'Thank you,' said Lenka.

A LITTLE WHILE later they were lying side by side in Erika's bed. Jacob and Karolina were fast asleep in the living room. Erika lay against the window, so that Lenka could have the baby beside her on the floor.

'That guy earlier is a colleague. Peterson, James is his first name. I was going to invite him in for coffee...'

'Just coffee?' asked Lenka.

'Yes. Maybe... I don't know.'

'He's handsome.'

'I know, but it isn't that, isn't just that. I wanted to wake up with someone, not be alone every morning, but I had a few drinks and I'm glad you were here. It would have been stupid to jump into bed with him. We have to work together.'

'You worked with Mark.'

'That was different, we got together before we joined the force. And we were husband and wife when we started out as police constables, everyone just took it as a given... Now I'm in charge of a murder investigation. I have to lead people. I don't want to be doing first dates and one night stands with one of my team.'

'I miss Mark,' said Lenka. 'He was a good man. The best.'

'He was,' said Erika. She wiped tears away with the back of her hand.

'I don't think Marek is a good man,' said Lenka.

'He loves you, and the kids. He looks after you. Sometimes you find yourself in a situation, and you've got to make the best of it.'

'Maybe, me coming here is a good thing. You won't be alone. You get to wake up next to me tomorrow morning,' said Lenka.

'Trust you to turn things around to your favour,' laughed Erika. She

turned and looked at her sister in the darkness. They looked alike in many ways, but Lenka was more daring with what she wore, she always had on tons of makeup and she'd kept her hair long whereas Erika's was cropped short.

'What's the case you're working on?'

Erika quickly told her all about the case, and Jessica Collins.

'Karolina's the same age. I couldn't imagine it if she was abducted,' said Lenka. It hung in the air, and it took a long time before Erika could go to sleep.

The rain continued to fall on Manor Mount. The water coursed down drainpipes, and alongside the kerb, gathering speed as it moved down the steep hill. There was a hollow echo as it poured into the drains, and it hit parked cars, and the plastic domes of the rubbish bins with a rattle.

Gerry stood in the shadows across the road, sheltering under a large tree and the scaffolding of a half-built house. A long thick wax jacket covered his large muscular frame, and the hood was up casting his face further in shadow.

He'd been prowling the area on foot earlier in the evening, a plan forming. It had been easy to find her address online from the electoral register. There was only one Erika Foster who spelt her name with a 'k'. He had to get in and out of her flat quickly. He now had Amanda Baker under surveillance, and DI Crawford was feeding much of the important information about the case back to her, but Gerry could read people, and Crawford was an idiot, and not in DCI Foster's trusted circle.

He now had access to her phone. The text message hadn't raised alarm bells, it had been a stroke of luck that her sister had left those voicemails from a withheld number, but he needed her landline and he needed to hear if she talked to anyone at home.

As Gerry approached the block of flats, he'd seen a tall black guy outside

getting into a cab. Moments after it drove away, he'd been rewarded with a glimpse of the detective when she came running out of the building, a pained expression on her face, searching for someone. Then she saw the cab just turning the corner at the bottom of the hill and her shoulders had sagged. She'd stayed there for a moment, her smooth pale face turned up to the heavens, eyes closed.

Gerry had felt the first stirrings of an erection. The pain on her face, the smooth skin and those red lips parted in pain... the rain was heavy and the blouse she wore rapidly became slick to her skin. Her breasts were small but pert.

He closed his eyes and focused. When he's opened them she had moved back down the drive and was opening the door to the communal entrance.

He'd stayed standing under the scaffolding, watching as until lights had gone out in her downstairs flat. He liked it, the dark, the sound of the rain in the empty street, the feeling of being hidden, hiding.

He then turned and walked off into the rain.

When Erika woke, it was still dark outside, and took a moment to find her bearings when she saw Lenka was already up, pacing the small bedroom. She rocked Eva in her arms, who was making little clucking crying noises.

‘What time is it?’

‘Five thirty,’ replied Lenka. ‘Sorry. I didn’t want her to wake you up.’

‘It’s okay. I need to be up early.’ Erika sat up and rubbed her face. ‘What are you going to do today? I’ve got a big day at work.’

‘Oh, we’ll find stuff to do. You’ve got some spare keys?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Can you take her for a sec. I’ll grab a shower before it gets crazy.’

Lenka transferred the bundle of blankets into Erika’s arms, and went off to the bathroom. The baby was so warm in Erika’s arms. She reached up with a tiny arm, and she looked at Erika through large inky brown eyes and then sneezed. Erika gently dabbed Eva’s tiny face with a muslin and a wave of love and sadness washed over her. Love for her perfect niece, and sadness that she would probably never have children of her own.

ERIKA ARRIVED at Bromley Cross just before seven thirty, and came up to the

top floor conference room. She was the first in and she drank her coffee and spent some time updating the whiteboards. She saw a fax had come through from Thames Water, with the location of the septic tank by Hayes Quarry. Then her phone rang,

‘Erika it’s me,’ said Isaac.

‘Early morning or late night?’ she asked.

‘Both. Look, I’ve had a chance to compare the tooth you recovered from the cellar at Hayes Quarry. I’m sorry. It’s not a match. It doesn’t belong to Jessica.’

Erika’s heart sank. She had to sit down on the corner of her desk.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I was able to do the simplest thing and compare it with the broken off tooth in the jaw. It didn’t fit or match. I then went through Jessica’s dental records in case the tooth had been exposed to fire, which can make the tooth shrink, but it doesn’t match those either. I’ve sent it off to a colleague of mine to see if any pulp can be extracted, and if we can pull any DNA from it, but it’s not Jessica’s.’

‘Oh shit.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Ok, not your fault, but I had hoped well, back to the drawing board.’

‘There is one other thing, it’s a long shot though.’

‘I’ll take a long shot if it means getting a conviction.’

‘When the skeleton was pulled out of the quarry, it was still wrapped up tight, there were no breaks or abrasions in the plastic.’

‘Are you asking me?’ said Erika.

‘I’m telling you. We’ve got pretty much everything inside, I hope that was there when she was dumped in the quarry. There is silt and soil, I want to send these samples to a colleague of mine in Aberdeen, a Forensic Geologist.’

‘So we can find evidence if Jessica was kept somewhere else, or buried

somewhere else.'

'Yes. It's a long shot, and this might just prove the theory that she was moved from one location. Finding that location means we have to find the soil from that location and match it. So it could take time.'

'Okay, thank you. Keep me posted,' said Erika. 'And get some sleep!'

Erika came off the phone and pulled up the file on the old quarry. She saw it had been a clay quarry. She went to Wikipedia and looked up the type of clay taken from the quarry and found a short paragraph,

THE LONDON CLAY is a stiff bluish clay, which becomes brown when weathered. The clay is still used commercially for making bricks, tiles, and coarse pottery. It is infertile for gardens and crops.

SHE CARRIED ON the search and found that Kent is made up of a mix of chalk, sandstone, and clay.

'Yes, Kent is a huge county,' came a voice behind her making her jump. Erika looked round and saw DI Crawford stood behind her, peering at her computer screen. 'Sorry,' he added.

'Don't creep up on people like that,' snapped Erika.

'I thought we knew what the quarry had been used for?'

'We do.' She went on to explain what Isaac had suggested, searching if there were different types of soil found with Jessica Collins. He perched on the corner of her desk, and nodded along as she spoke,

'There's so much landscape to compare it to,' he said. 'With the soil found in near the Thames Estuary, the chalk composites towards Dover... did you know that the Kent coast, the Strait of Dover is only 21 miles from Europe?'

'Yes, I just read that on the screen,' snapped Erika.

‘Hang on,’ he said standing up. ‘What you said earlier, about the clay being used commercially for making bricks and tiles. Do you think that could be a link, with Martin Collins? He’s a builder.’

Erika stared at him for a moment,

‘How is that a link?’

‘He could have known about it from a local builder...’

Erika found his nodding face irritating. She didn’t know if he was being genuine or showing off,

‘Crawford, the quarry stopped being used for clay before the First World War. Martin Collins and the family didn’t move here until the mid 1980s. And it’s a bloody common, the quarry was a local landmark.’

‘Oh,’ said Crawford blushing. A few officers came through to the incident room, followed by Moss and Peterson. Erika suddenly felt all her anger and frustration bubbling up inside her, and Crawford was the perfect outlet,

‘This is a complicated enough investigation without you pulling stupid theories out of your arse. It doesn’t make you look clever, and it pisses me off. Now unless you’ve got anything of actual value to say, bugger off...’

The other officers were now creeping over to their desks and taking off their coats. DI Crawford was now bright red, and his eyes were filling up.

‘And I have no time on my team for crying,’ she said. ‘What can you tell me about the septic tank at the cottage?’

‘Um, I’m still waiting to hear,’ muttered Crawford trying to keep hold of himself.

‘Well, stop fucking about, stop trying to be clever, and chase it. Do the job!’ she shouted. More officers were now arriving and there was an uncomfortable silence as they took off their coats and turned on their computers. ‘Does anyone else have any useless theories about who killed Jessica Collins?’ she added to the room. Everyone was quiet. ‘Good. Now, I’ve just heard back that the tooth we found in the cellar at hayes quarry

doesn't belong to Jessica.'

There was a groan from several of the officers.

'Yes, my feeling exactly. So we need to re-double our efforts. Maybe some of you can help Crawford here.'

She went into her office and slammed the glass door, hating the fact that her team could still see her. She spent the next couple of hours on her computer, raking through the case files.

There was a knock at her door and Moss stood outside. She was waving a small white tissue.

'I come in peace,' she said.

'Come inside, close the door,' said Erika. 'What is it?'

'The Specialist Casework Investigation Team have managed to track down the camcorder tapes and photos taken by Trevor Marksman,' said Moss. 'John Mc Gorry is trying to track down something we can play them on.'

It was raining hard, and DI Crawford was out the back of Bromley Station sheltering under a small Perspex awning over the rubbish bins. The rain clattered down hard on the plastic above, as he told Amanda Baker how Erika had called him out in front of the whole incident room.

‘She’s a bitch, she just saw me as someone to pick on,’ Crawford was saying, his voice reaching a whiny higher octave.

‘I thought you liked bitches,’ said Amanda Baker dryly on the other end of the phone.

‘Don’t make fun of me. You know I’m this close to walking off this case...’

‘But you won’t because you’re there for me, aren’t you? And there’s a reason you are.’

Crawford pulled a face and stuck up his middle finger to the phone handset, ‘Yes, of course.’

‘So tell, me, what’s happening?’

‘Video evidence arrived this morning, but it was on those old small camcorder tapes.’

‘What video evidence?’ she asked impatiently.

‘Stuff that they seized from Trevor Marksman, years ago.’

‘I seized it from Marksman. What are they doing with it?’

‘They’ve got one of those VHS adaptors, thanks to me that is, and they’re watching them at the same time as playing them through a digital converter for uploading to HOLMES...’

‘Why aren’t you there watching them?’

I’m sick of all these bloody women bossing me around he thought. The wind changed direction and began to pelt rain vertically under the plastic dome above. ‘I wasn’t asked.’ He had to move further under it, against the stinking row of blue bins. He went on to tell her that analysis had been ordered on the soil samples found with Jessica.

‘I want to see those videos. You let me know as soon as they’re uploaded,’ said Amanda. ‘There’s something I remember from those videos... I’m not quite sure but it’s a gut feeling, just out of my grasp,’ she said. ‘Now go back inside, and don’t rouse suspicion.’

She hung up.

‘I bet you’ve got something in your grasp right now. Your third glass of wine,’ he said petulantly.

SEVEN MILES AWAY, in a house on the outskirts of South London, Gerry sat in a small flat overlooking a set of train tracks. The curtains were drawn against the wind and the rain outside.

A laptop was open on a desk, and he had listened to the conversation between Amanda Baker and DI Crawford. He played back a snippet of the conversation, and Amanda’s gravelly voice echoed around the small room,

‘There’s something I remember from those videos... I’m not quite sure but it’s a gut feeling, just out of my grasp.’

He picked up a phone which had just one number programmed into its memory and dialled. A voice answered.

‘She’s getting close. Do you want me to take it to the next level?’ asked

Gerry

‘No. Keep listening,’ came the voice. ‘If we move on this, we have to be sure.’

Erika and John were crammed into one of the small viewing suites in Bromley Station. They discovered that Trevor Marksman, in the interests of being frugal, had filmed had used 120 minute Hi8 camcorder tapes using Long Play mode, which meant that each tape ran for 4 hours.

‘And now, tape two,’ said John switching them over in the machine. Erika sat up and stretched out her arms.

‘Did he ever think he was going to watch that back?’

‘What are you talking about Boss? Four hours of windy walks in grey empty parks, traffic on the ring road, and a badly filmed and lit firework display from his bedroom window, this is box office gold,’ replied John. He wore latex gloves as he pulled the first little Hi8 tape from its case and reached for the next.

‘What’s he written there?’ asked Erika. John held up the case.

‘GARY B’DAY PARTY, April 1990.’ He said before slipped it out of the case. He held the small black cassette up to the light. ‘The tapes are in good nick.’

‘They’ve been kept in climate controlled storage.’

He dropped it into the VHS adaptor and slid it into the machine. Then, checking the feed was being uploaded to the laptop, he pressed play.

The small screen in front of them on the desk burst to life with static, and then at the top of the screen appeared the interior of a television lounge in the halfway house. It was in black and white, shook a little and then became coloured. Twenty men of different ages, most dressed scruffily, stood around on the polished wood floor. Several couches and sofas were dotted about, old and ripped, and a small TV was bolted high up on the wall. A large picture window looked out onto a grey sky and a patch of grass. For a few moments the light outside whited out the camera. They heard some voices, and then the camera turned to a mirror. Staring back was the reflection of Trevor Marskman, holding the videocamera before he was hideously scarred.

‘Here we are on the 2nd April for Gary Lundy’s twenty-fourth birthday!’ he said to his reflection. The camera whipped round to show a thin man sat in a fraying sofa. He had elongated features, and his hair was greasy and parted flat to the left. His nose was huge and he had one of his fingers buried in his left nostril up to the knuckle.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Trevor’s voice from behind the camera.

‘Looking for something decent to eat,’ replied Gary pulling his finger out of his nose. ‘Now fuck off,’ he snarled.

The image span away as the camera moved across the room, past a sad and creepy group of men hovering around a saggy buffet table covered in plastic bowls of crisps, and a small round iced cake studded with smarties. One short round little man wore a party hat, the elastic dug into his three chins and his long grey hair flowed from underneath.

‘Jesus, all these bloody nonces were living just up the road from the Collins’s,’ said John as they watched.

Back on screen the fat little man in the party hat was looking into the lens,

‘Can I have a go?’ he asked, reaching up, smiling, showing he had only two teeth.

‘No...’ said Trevor, his hand appearing in shot and tartly slapping the fat

man's hand as it grabbed for the camcorder.

'Go, on I've never seen one before...'

'Get you fucking hands off!' whined Trevor. His hand swooped round and clouted the small man hard around the head. He went down on the floor, the elastic snapping on his party hat. He got up and charged at the camera. There was a jerky tussle and then the image went black.

'Bloody hell, we're going to have to watch the whole party aren't we?' said John. Erika nodded grimly. The screen then burst back to life, the party again, but a little later on. Music was playing and some of the men were dancing awkwardly. The camera swung back over to Gary, still sat in the corner picking his nose. He pulled out his finger and put it in his mouth.

'That's disgusting,' said John turning away from the screen and making a face.

'It's alright, he's gone,' said Erika.

The camera swung round to show the small fat man, wearing a new party hat, and sat in a corner by an old upright piano. He was stuffing his face from a plate piled high with food, another plate waiting on the lid of the piano beside him.

'What's up with him?' asked a voice out of shot.

'He's being a dick, wanted to use my camera,' said Trevor's voice as he cruelly zoomed in close on the fat man's feasting little mouth. 'He's got two fucking thumbs. I don't let anyone touch this camera,' The image blurred in and out as he stuffed a fork full of quiche in his mouth, crumbs catching in his beard. 'Fat fuck,' said Trevor.

There was a high pitched girlish laugh and the camera panned round to a close up of tall bald red-faced man with crooked rabbit teeth.

'You'll let me have a go, won't you?' he asked.

'NO!'

There seemed to be another tussle and the image flicked forward to later in the afternoon. It was now growing dark in the television room, and the

only light in the room was the candles on the cake, which was being carried across the room by a tall man. Trevor followed behind him as they took the cake to Gary, who was still sitting in the armchair.

‘Go on, give it a blow!’ cried a voice. Gary protested and then blew out the candles. ‘What did you wish for?’ shouted another voice.

‘To fucking die,’ said Gary sitting back and folding his arms. The man holding the cake turned to the camera for a moment, and then walked out of shot.

‘Shit!’ said Erika, ‘hang on, run it back.’

‘I can’t, I’m doing the digital transfer,’ said John. Trevor followed behind the man, over to the long table.

‘I know that man,’ said Erika. ‘He was at Trevor Marksman’s the other day. Pause it, now!’

ERIKA DASHED out of the viewing suite and up the stairs to the incident room. Peterson was just coming off the phone when she grabbed him and told him to come downstairs. When they got back to the viewing suite. He watched with them. On the screen, Trevor now focused on Joel who was talking to the camera, joking as if this party was a red carpet event.

‘That’s him isn’t it? Joel. He’s got hair in the video, but he’s got the South African accent,’ said Erika.

‘He’s got the same strange milky blue eyes,’ added Peterson. ‘Yep, and that scar, running down from his temple to behind his ear.’

‘He said his name was Joel, but didn’t give a surname. I want a list of everyone who was in that half way house during 1990,’ said Erika.

They looked back at the screen where one of the other men in the halfway house had taken the camera, and Trevor and Joel were dancing together, as music boomed from a crackling sound system.

Erika and John watched two more of the video tapes in the afternoon, they were shorter, recorded using standard play. They consisted of several spring days spent in the park local to Avondale Road. Trevor Marksman filmed lots of local children, often encouraging the parents to smile and wave at the camera as they pushed their children on the swings, and caught them at the bottom of slides.

Jessica Collins made her first appearance in one of the videos in a clip which was dated 11.06.1990, playing at the park on a see-saw with another dark haired girl. They laughed and bounced up and down, and in the background a younger version of both Marianne and Laura sat on a bench in the shade of a large oak tree. Laura was smoking, and barely listening as Marianne leaned in to talk to her.

The camera watched Jessica play for several minutes, zooming in from the other side of the park. Erika was struck how beautiful and carefree she was, dancing with her friend, swinging from the climbing frame... Erika's feelings turned to revulsion when she realised that she was watching all of this through Trevor Marksman's eyes.

For several minutes the image had remained still and silent, just the gentle sounds of birds singing and children playing. Then there was a curse as the

low battery sign began to flash in the corner of the screen. The image wobbled, and retreated from the park, still watching the girls on the climbing frame. The camera then reached a small gate at the edge of the park, and just before the battery died, and the picture went black, there was a brief flash of a familiar face as a hand took the camera.

‘Hang on, who was that?’ asked Erika as they both stared at the blank screen.

‘That was the end of the tape,’ said John.

‘The camera turned round, just as the tape ended... Can we run it back?’

John took out the tape, and pulled the laptop towards him on the desk. They now had a digital recording. He found the last few minutes of the tape and ran it forward. It took a few attempts, as the face was only on screen for a fraction of a second, but when they had the image it was undoubtedly Trevor Marksman.

They stared at it for a few moments.

‘This means that Trevor wasn’t filming the girls all the time. In the previous investigation it was taken as read that he was doing all the filming,’ said Erika.

‘And he flipped out at that party that he wouldn’t let anyone use the camera,’ said John. He played it back again,

‘Listen, can you hear? A voice says, “there you go”. It’s sounds South African.’

There was a knock at the door and Peterson returned,

‘Boss. I’ve found Joel Michaels. He changed his name in 1995, his birth name is Peter Michaels. He’s fifty-three years old. He was in the halfway house after his release from prison. He served six years from February 1984 until his release in March 1990, for the imprisonment and rape of a nine year old boy.’

A look passed between Erika and John. Peterson went on,

‘Peter Michaels was interviewed in 1990, along with all the residents of

the half way house, and like Marksman, he had an alibi for 7th August 1990. However, he was never placed under surveillance in the weeks after Jessica disappeared. He wasn't seen to have any interest in her, nor was he seen in or around her house.'

'How did you track him down?' asked Erika.

'Trevor Marksman invested his compensation from the CPS in property, and he's done well out of it. His company Marksman Ltd is listed as having assets of five million. There is one other person in the Ltd partnership, and that's Joel Michaels. They live together.'

'It's a long shot,' said John.

'Sometimes all you need is a long shot,' replied Erika.

It was late when Erika called Marsh from her office at Bromley South. She'd let most of her team go, only John, Moss and Peterson stayed behind working.

'Erika, I told you about going near to Trevor Marksman,' said Marsh. 'Even if you do find something, the whole of the last investigation was compromised.'

'Sir, I don't want to bring in Marksman. I want to bring in Joel Michaels. He was ruled out of the last investigation, and we didn't know the link between him and Trevor...'

'I thought you had this Bob Jennings in the frame, the guy who was squatting by Hayes Quarry?'

'Yes he is still a suspect, but there isn't so much urgency, with him being dead. This afternoon we located the septic tank behind the cottage by the quarry. It's under tons of earth and roots, but there's a team going over first thing tomorrow to clear it. I also heard back from Rosemary Hooley. She says she lent Bob Jennings a petrol powered generator during the summer of 1990. Apparently he wanted one so he could have a fridge and ice cream at the cottage. She also found out he was keeping the generator in the basement, and they had a row about it. This could link in with why Jessica had high

levels of lead petrol in her bones... Sir this could be connected, I don't know, we could be looking at a paedophile ring.'

Marsh was silent on the end of the phone for a moment,

'When do you want to do this?'

'I want to do it tonight. Element of surprise. I want to let him sweat in a cell until tomorrow morning.'

'This sounds like it's getting personal, Erika. You have to realise that Trevor Marksman is now a very wealthy man, and I presume that he will have a good lawyer on hand to help out his friend.'

'Sir, I'm not being personal. I'm angry from having to watch hours of video showing convicted paedophiles being thrown parties, taken on trips out to the sea side, and all of the video Marksman took of Jessica Collins, and several other local children. I'm angry that she is just a pile of bones, and somewhere out there whoever did this is running free. I want to question this man. That's all, and I have evidence to support my suspicions....'

Marsh was silent on the phone for a moment.

'Okay. You've got the go-ahead, but you do this tomorrow morning, when you've slept and we can prepare. Okay?'

'Yes, Sir thank you.'

Erika arrived home just after nine, when she opened the front door. Lenka was in the hallway. Erika started to speak, but she put her finger to her lips.

‘The kids are asleep,’ she whispered. ‘It’s so late. Where were you?’

‘At work,’ whispered Erika sloughing off her shoes and putting down her bag.

‘Is everything okay?’

Erika nodded.

‘You left at seven this morning!’

Erika pulled off her coat. ‘I usually work like this.’

‘What did Mark have to say about that?’

‘Lenka, can you let me get inside the door!’

‘Shhh! I’ve only just got them settled.’

Erika peered through to the living room where the resting forms of the kids were asleep on the sofa bed.

‘Lenka, my computer is nearly dead, and the charger is in there,’ she whispered.

‘What does it look like?’

‘What do you mean. It’s a charger?’ Hissed Erika. She went to go into the living room, but Lenka held her back.

‘No. You’ll wake them up. Karolina has been really upset all day, and I’ve only just got them to sleep.’

‘Lenka, I need my charger.’

‘Did you eat?’

‘I had lunch.’

Lenka crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, ‘You should at least eat. I cooked. You take a shower and I’ll look for your charger.’

Erika went to protest, but Lenka pushed her into the bathroom and closed the door.

WHEN SHE EMERGED from the shower, she was hit by the delicious smell of smoked meat, potato and pickle. The microwave beeped and Lenka came out with a steaming plate of Fransuzky Zemiaky, which was potato, egg, and smoked sausage, sliced very thin, stacked in a casserole dish and baked.

‘Oh my God. It smells delicious. Just like the one Mum used to make,’ said Erika her mouth watering.

They came into the bedroom, which was stuffed with Eva’s buggy, a pile of nappies, and the dresser table had been converted into a changing table. Mark’s glit framed photo had been pushed to the back. His handsome face, stared back at her with its perpetual smile. Erika sat on the bed and tucked into the steaming plate of food.

‘My god this is amazing. Thank you.’

‘I went shopping,’ said Lenka. ‘It’s nice round here, but lots of different people, Indian, Black, Chinese. The kids were a bit scared by everything... Your garden is nice, and we met a couple of neighbours. A woman upstairs with two little girls, Jakub went knocking on all the doors until he found them and they came and played.’

‘They did? How did you talk to them?’

‘I know a few words in English, the mother was nice. What’s her name?’

Erika shrugged through a mouthful of food. 'You've lived here for five months and you don't know your neighbours?'

'I'm busy.'

'What happened today with the handsome guy, Peterson?'

'Nothing, really. We didn't talk about it.'

'Do you think anything will happen? He's lovely.'

Erika shrugged.

'You could invite him over. I'd cook something...' Erika gave her a look chewing a mouthful of the food.

'I know it's crowded and I'm sorry.'

Erika swallowed, 'Lenka, give it a rest.'

'A man called today, to read the meter. I think that's what he came for, I was busy with the kids in and outside, it was when the girls from upstairs were here. He left this letter,' she said pulling it out of her pocket.

Erika scanned it and saw it was from the letting agent, confirming that the gas certificate had to be checked and updated.

'The food here is very expensive. What kind of things do you buy?'

'Lenka, can you just give me a minute to breathe. I've had a stressful day and you're just jabbering on!'

From the buggy, Eva woke up and started to wail.

'You woke her up,' said Lenka squeezing past Erika and picking Eva up. 'There, there, it's okay. Shush, shush.' Lenka pulled her shirt down and gave the baby her breast, but she shrieked even louder. 'Can you go and shut the living room door?'

Erika shovelled in another mouthful of food and squeezed past, juggling her plate and came out into the hallway where she closed the living room door, and then the bedroom door against the screaming of the baby. She sat on the carpet by the front door with her plate on the floor and finished eating.

WHAT COULDN'T SEE, above her, fixed to the inside of the housing around the electricity meter was a small listening device.

Joel Michaels was arrested early the next morning at the flat he shared with Trevor Marksman. Erika, accompanied the uniform officers, along with Moss, made the arrest. When they arrived at the penthouse flat, Marksman sat at a long table against one of the floor to ceiling windows, looking out at the foggy morning view of the Thames.

When the officers produced their ID's and told Joel Michaels he was under arrest. Marksman rose to his feet. He was dressed immaculately in powder blue slacks and a perfectly ironed white shirt buttoned up to his neck. Joel didn't react when Erika read him his rights, and he was handcuffed and marched out.

'Why? He hasn't done anything,' said Marksman, swaying unsteadily the raw skin around his eyes creasing in pain. 'Take me instead.'

'We're not arresting you,' said Erika.

'He didn't kill Jessica Collins. I promise you. He didn't do it,' said Marksman.

As Erika drove back behind the police car, she played it over in her mind again, the pain in his eyes, his insistence. She almost believed him. This was when she realised that they were a couple.

THEY RETURNED TO BROMLEY STATION, and Joel Michaels was booked and taken down to a holding cell. It soon became clear that someone had tipped off the media. A large group of press and photographers were congregating on the steps outside the main entrance of the station.

Erika was preparing to interview Michaels when Moss came up to the incident room and said she should come downstairs. When they reached the foyer of the station, they saw that a large black people carrier was parked illegally on the double yellow lines outside, and Trevor Marksman stood outside the car, and was addressing the press.

‘What the hell?’ asked Erika. ‘Can we do anything about this?’

They came to the entrance and listened.

‘This is once again a bullying tactic by the Metropolitan Police. It’s bad enough that one of their officers was on record as tipping off a vigilante group who put a petrol bomb through my door...’ At this point he pulled off the huge dark glasses he wore which showed the full extent of the skin grafts around his eyes. ‘I have to live with this face for the rest of my life! The death of Jessica Collins was a tragedy, but I maintain my innocence! I have an alibi and I was not responsible. Now the police have arrested my partner, a man who has stood by me for twenty-six years. He is also my full time carer. He is innocent, and this is a desperate plea from the police to intimidate me and punish me for successfully winning a case against them!’

A voice could be heard from amongst the crowds of people and journalists who had gathered outside, and Marianne Collins appeared wearing a long winter coat, she was flanked by her daughter Laura.

‘Child killer!’ she shouted. ‘You lying piece of shit murderer!’

There was a commotion as she pushed her way through the crowds to the front.

Erika moved quickly over to the front desk and picked up a phone, ‘We’ve got a situation developing outside the front entrance of the station, all officers please make their way up to the front desk.’

When Erika came off the phone, Marianne and Trevor were engaged in a stand off. The crowd had grown and as well as the press there were several of the younger people in the crowd taking video on their phones.

‘You took my daughter and you killed her with your disgusting friends, and now you’re laughing at us!’

‘Listen to me,’ said Trevor, putting up one of his misshapen hands to try and placated her.

‘Don’t you tell me to listen you, never get to tell me anything! You evil bastard! You killed her, you killed my girl and you dumped her in the water!!!’ screamed Marianne.

Laura stood silently beside her mother, as tears rolled down her face. The atmosphere changed in the crowd and Erika saw that Marianne was now wielding a large kitchen knife. The crowd scattered, spilling out into the main road amongst the traffic which was queueing at the traffic lights.

Marianne started to slash at Trevor Marksman, gouging into the flesh of his forearms arms where he put them up to protect himself. Laura’s eyes were wide and she was now screaming at her mother to stop.

‘Shit!’ cried Erika, ‘Where are my uniform officers?’

Erika and Moss dashed outside and pushed their way down the stairs. Seconds later, they were joined by six uniformed officers. They managed to grab Marianne Collins who was covered in blood, it was soaking into the front of her white blouse and daubed her left cheek.

A young male PC, wearing an anti-stab vest managed to get hold of Marianne’s arm and twisted it so she dropped the knife. He kicked it away where another officer trapped it under his shoe.

Marianne was now screaming, her throat sounded raw. She was knocked the ground and female PC placed her boot in her back and handcuffed her hands behind her back.

Erika ran to Trevor Marksman, who had fallen in between the bumper and front of two cars. He lay covered in blood which pumped out of the three

gaping wounds in his forearms. She could see that one was slit right down to the bone. Erika sloughed off her thin suit jacket and started to wrap it around his bleeding arms.

‘We need an ambulance! This man is bleeding!’ she shouted above the mayhem, crowds were gathering on both sides of the pavement, people were streaming out from the train station on the opposite side of the road, and the traffic was backing up at the main junction.

Marianne Collins was dragged away screaming and covered in blood, just as an officer came running from the main entrance of the station with a first aid kit.

All the time the shutters from the press cameras fired off photographs and recorded video of the chaos.

The Assistant Commissioner, Camilla Brace-Cosworthy, turned from the large television on the wall in her office. It was early the next morning, and she had just played Erika and Marsh a two minute roundup of the previous days events from the SKY News app.

The incident outside Bromley South Station had been headline news the previous evening. It had also re-ignited interest for the press in the case. The two minute roundup was edited highlights, designed to show the maximum chaos, moving from the professional video when Trevor Marksman spoke outside Bromley station, to shaky mobile phone footage taken up-close of Marianne Collins wielding the knife, climaxing in her being handcuffed face down on the pavement and Trevor Marksman covered in blood.

Erika shifted uncomfortably where she stood in front of the desk, she looked across at Marsh, who sat to the left of Camilla's desk.

'What part of bringing this man in quietly for questioning did you ignore?' asked Camilla peering up at Erika over the top of her glasses. She hadn't invited Erika to sit, which was a bad sign. 'That was Commander Marsh's direct order when you spoke to him about making this arrest?'

'Yes Ma'am. We couldn't have anticipated this chain of events. We believe that Marianne Collins was tipped off, just as the press were tipped

off.'

'I suggest you spend your time finding the leak and then plug it with ruthless force.'

'My officers are looking into this with urgency.'

'Where does this leave our case?'

'Trevor Marksman is in hospital, he lost a great deal of blood but will make a full recovery. Due to the nature of his previous skin injuries. He will have to spend longer in hospital.'

'And the suspect you have in custody?'

'I spent yesterday afternoon questioning Joel Michaels... I had arrested him on the basis that he hadn't mentioned in his original statement that he was with Trevor Matthews when he followed Jessica Collins taking video and photos.'

'And?'

'And he informed us that he made two statements to DCI Amanda Baker, my predecessor...'

'I know who she is,' interrupted Camilla.

'Of course ma'am. We have his first statement on record, but we are missing documentation and evidence from the first investigation, so we are at a disadvantage. Either way, the fact he was working with Marksman, and they have a relationship is a lead. He maintains his innocence, saying that they used to go the park and take photos and video of children and their parents to help develop their skills in photography and film making. Which, coming from him as a convicted paedophile is a load of crap, I think.'

'Right. And during the search of the cottage beside Hayes Quarry, you found a tooth, but it doesn't doesn't match Jessica Collins.'

'That's correct.'

'And there was a search conducted of the septic tank?'

'That too came back with no evidence. We are checking the soil samples recovered from the plastic Jessica was wrapped in when she was placed in the

water, but we won't have results for some days.'

'The man who lived in the cottage, Bob Jennings, do you have any reason to believe he was involved with Trevor Marksman or Joel Michaels?'

'No.'

'So three weeks in to a very expensive investigation you have very little to show?'

Erika didn't answer and struggled to keep eye contact and not to look down at the floor.

'We were planning on doing a television appeal with the Collins family,' said Marsh speaking for the first time. 'But I don't think this will be something we can pursue. Marianne Collins has been released on bail, the CPS is bound to go easy on her, but the image of her wielding a knife is looming large in people's minds...'

'Yes, we want grieving mother, not knife-wielding maniac,' agreed Camilla. She took off her glasses and chewed on one of the stems for a moment. Erika could feel the sweat trickling down her back.

'You've been here before, several times, haven't you, DCI Foster?' she said.

'I've been here once before, Ma'am,'

'I'm talking metaphorically,' she snapped. 'You seem to lurch between brilliance and bone-headed stupidity.'

'In my defence, when Marianne Collins pulled out the knife, I had officers on the scene immediately...'

'It happened on the steps of your police station, which is manned from anything between five and fifty uniformed officers each day, don't give me bullshit,' said Camilla, losing her cool. Erika opened her mouth, but didn't know what to say. 'On those same steps where Superintendent Yale launched his knife crime initiative and knife amnesty.'

Camilla put her glasses back on. Erika opened her mouth to speak, but she put her hand up.

‘I’m in no doubt of what a good officer you are, but we now have the media spotlight firmly on a tricky case. Do you believe that Joel Michaels is a potential suspect?’

‘Yes. I also believe we could still find a link between Marksman, Michaels and Bob Jennings. I would like to put forward that we exhume Jennings’ body.’

‘Absolutely not,’ said Camilla. ‘I would like more evidence than a hunch before we go down that road. And after twenty-six years underground what would you expect to find?’

‘Toxicology, and evidence of broken bones, foul play which could prove that he didn’t commit suicide.’

‘And then what? The forensic evidence would be negligible and forensics have already been over the cottage and found virtually nothing.’

‘We found a tooth, and if the tooth belonged to Jennings.’

‘It could mean it was knocked out, or it fell out. People who spend their time squatting in abandoned properties aren’t prized for their oral hygiene...’

‘Ma’am I believe that Bob Jennings saw something the night Jessica was dumped in the quarry, and I believe that he was killed to keep him from identifying who it was.’

‘It’s not enough to believe. You need to back it up with hard evidence. Nothing annoys me more than people using their beliefs to justify their actions... How can you prove anything right now, short of building a time machine and going back?’

Erika stood in front of her and wanted the ground to swallow her up.

‘Now I’m going to leave you on this case for the time being, whilst I look for a suitable replacement. Perhaps this will work in your favor. It seems when the chips are down you deliver results.’

WHEN THE MEETING WAS OVER, Marsh caught up with Erika at the lifts.

‘It could have been worse,’ he said.

‘How could that have gone any worse?’ she said turning to him.

‘It could have been Oakley.’

‘I could deal with Assistant Commissioner Oakley. He was a bigoted old git. He rose to the bait, I could out smart him. She’s... She’s bloody good.’

‘Yes. Speaking as your friend and not your superior officer for a moment, she does make my testicles leap into my abdomen.’

The lift doors opened and they got in. Marsh pressed the button for the ground floor and Erika felt her stomach lurch as they zoomed down the twelve floors of the New Scotland yard building.

‘This is the first case where I feel...’

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Where I feel I’m not going to solve it.’ Marsh looked as if he was going to put his arm around her, but the lift came to a stop and a group of officers got in. Erika turned to the wall and tried to keep her emotions under control.

When they came out onto the road outside New Scotland Yard the sky was threatening rain, again.

‘I keep going back to that day, all those years ago, August 7th,’ said Erika. ‘I keep looking at the witness statements, of the hundreds of people who were in the area, the remaining neighbours. How can one little girl have gone missing?’

‘Children go missing all the time, every day in every country,’ said Marsh, buttoning up his coat against the cold wind. ‘She was white and middle-class with blond hair. Did you see all the missing child reports Isaac went through to match the dental records?’

‘No.’

‘Seventeen children went missing in Kent during 1990. Four of them were found alive, another two were found dead. But nine of them remain missing.’

‘So you’re saying this is linked?’

‘What I’m saying is that this wasn’t an isolated incident. The media grabbed hold of it, and pulled at our heart strings, and quite rightly too. Just don’t look on your inability to solve this as a personal failure.’

‘That’s all very easy to say, but I only thing I can do is this. I’m not a wife, I’ll never be a mother. This is my life.’

‘And what happens in ten or twelve years when you retire? You need to find a place for yourself in the world in addition to the job.’

It started to rain and he grinned and walked off. ‘Keep in touch,’ he said without turning back.

Erika pulled her collar up and made for the car park.

DI Crawford had phoned Amanda Baker several times over the past couple of days. He had let her know that the Trevor Marksman videos were uploaded to HOLMES, and he also told her about the police bringing in Joel Michaels, and shared that much of the team had their doubts about him.

She had watched them with interest, in particular the video of Jessica playing in the park and of Marianne and Laura on the two occasions that they were together in the background.

had watched the chaos unfold in the news. She always had the nightly news recorded on her Sky + box and, so was able to watch it over several times. She felt pleased for Marianne, everything had been taken from her, and being able to vent her emotions on a grand scale must have been cathartic, she thought.

When she watched it back the third time, she noticed Laura stood by the kerb a little way from her mother. She had such a strange look on her face, and what was she doing, she was shaking her head. She remembered the terrible arguments that Marianne and Laura had in the days after Jessica vanished. Marianne never gave the girl a break, criticising her. Nancy Greene would often report back that Marianne was spinning out of control and she was taking out her frustration on the one daughter she still had.

Amanda settled back down in her chair and ran the segment back and watched it again. She turned up the volume, and saw the moment where Marianne brought out the knife. The sound was poor and her voice sounded reedy against the traffic and sounds from the street, but she heard Marianne shout,

‘She was mine! She was mine and you took her!’ as she lunged at Marksman with the knife. The camera moved round and caught Laura, and again she was shaking her head.

‘Why the hell would she come with her mother, and then shake her head. Did she know that she’d brought a knife with her? She should either join in with the shouting or look shocked...’ said Amanda to herself. She leaned over and topped up her glass from a bottle on the floor beside her feet. She tipped it up to get the last of the dregs and wound the video back. She watched it again, Marianne lunge for Trevor and then the camera moving round to Laura shaking her head in disagreement. And then it hit her,

‘Jesus christ,’ she said. ‘That’s it!’

Erika had decided to visit Marianne and when she arrived at 7 Avondale Road, there was a short round faced woman at the door with a grey haired man with a camera slung around his neck. The chain was on the front door and a voice was telling them to go away.

Erika pulled out her ID.

‘This is private property. Who are you?’ she asked.

‘Eva Castle, Daily Mail,’ said the woman. ‘We’re only asking to get her mother’s side of the story...’

‘NO!’ said the voice through the chain, which Erika realised was Laura.

‘Love, your Mum slashed a local paedophile with a knife in public, this is always going to be in your favour but it’s a chance to get your side of the story,’ said Eva leaning into the gap.

‘Come on, piss off,’ said Erika. The photographer lifted his camera and started to fire off some pictures in her face. Erika reached out and pushed the lens down.

‘Police brutality?’ he said with a glint in his eye. His voice had a high raspy register.

‘I could arrest you for harassment, both of you. You’re on private property. I’d make sure they take up most of the day processing you, taking

DNA swabs for our database, the works. I'll also confiscate your camera. What with all our glorious bureaucracy, you wouldn't get it back for quite some time,' said Erika.

There was a brief stand-off where Erika and the photographer refused to budge.

'Come on Dave,' said Eva. 'S'not worth it...'

Erika stared them down as they moved off and up the driveway, she then turned and knocked on the front door. After a moment it opened a little, and Laura's face stared through the gap.

'Can I come in and talk?' asked Erika. Laura's eyes flitted from side to side then she relented and opened the door. The house was still and silent, and a clock chimed from upstairs.

'Can I talk to your mum? We haven't been able to get a statement from her.'

'She's upstairs. The doctor gave her something to sleep.'

'How long ago was that?'

'He's just left, she's going to be out for hours...'

'Ok. Can I talk to you?'

'What about?' asked Laura her face sagging fearfully. She was dressed in tight blue jeans and a white blouse tucked in at the waist, showing off an enviable figure. Her face was bare and free of the heavy makeup, and Erika was shocked how old she looked without it, much older than her 44 years.

'Please, just for a moment.'

Laura led Erika through the hallway to the kitchen.

'Would you like tea?' asked Laura. Erika smiled and nodded. She moved and filled the kettle, and her hands were shaking.

'I wanted to ask who tipped you off about Trevor Marskman being in town?'

'Mum had a phone call,' said Laura placing the kettle down.

'And who was the phone call from?' asked Erika.

‘I don't know. I was outside in the garden and she was inside watching television.’

‘So your mother answered the phone?’

‘Yes, she answered the phone and then she came through here to tell me.’
Laura opened the cupboard and pulled a couple of cups out.

‘I thought you just said you out in the garden?’ asked Erika. Laura dropped one of the cups and it shattered across the floor.

‘Oh, shit, sorry...’

‘It’s okay,’ said Erika spying a dustpan and brush on the radiator by the door. She retrieved it and kneeled down to help

‘I was out in the garden, I meant to say that she came out and got me,’ said Laura, carefully picking up two long shards of broken china.

‘So it was her idea to go into town and confront Trevor?’ asked Erika sweeping the tiny bits of cup into the dustpan.

Laura nodded. She picked up the last of the big pieces and stood moving over to a pedal bin.

‘Did she say who the person was on the end of telephone?’

‘She said it was a journalist,’ replied Laura pressing on the pedal, the lid popped up and Erika moved over to tip the pieces in from the dustpan. On the top was a small cardboard pill box with the name Halcion written on it.

‘Is someone ill?’ asked Erika.

‘That what the doctor prescribed for Mum. A sleeping thing,’ said Laura. She moved away and started to make the tea again.

‘So there was no name?’

‘I don’t know his name,’ she said quickly.

‘The journalist was a ‘he’?’

‘Oh, I thought you meant the doctor, um no I she didn’t tell me the name of the journalist or if he was a he or a she... As I said, we’ve had so many over the years, spying, phishing etc.’

Laura filled the tea pot with her back to Erika.

‘Did your Mum explicitly say what she was going to do?’

‘She wanted to see Trevor, and she wanted to ask him once and for all if he did it.’

‘Didn't you realise it was a bad idea, Laura?’

Laura placed her hands on the work surface and bowed her head, nodding.

‘She'd had a lot to drink, and said she was going to drive into town with or without me.’

‘Did you know your mother had taken a knife?’

‘No, and I wouldn't have taken her if I knew what she was going to do... What's going to happen to her? I think she's finally lost it. Do you think they'll commit her to a mental hospital? Or should I commit her?’

Laura started to cry and Erika went and took her in her arms.

‘It's so hard,’ Laura said her chest heaving. ‘We need a funeral. We need to draw a line under all this pain and suffering, and we need to put Jessica to rest. Do you know when we can have it?’ She looked up at Erika.

‘I hope you can very soon... What does Oscar Browne have to say?’

‘What do you mean?’ she answered sharply. She pulled away from Erika and went to get the milk from the fridge.

‘He's working as your liaison with the police. He's asked us to be the point of contact for the family?’

‘Yes. Sorry, he is,’ said Laura. Her hands were still shaking.

‘How is your relationship after all these years?’

‘We don't really have one. We broke up, he's not been on my radar really. I have my kids and my husband. He works for Lloyds bank in Bromley... I have my own mobile nail business. Look,’ she added holding up her hand where the nails were bitten down to the quick. The doorbell chimed and she jumped.

‘Okay, well I'll be going,’ said Erika. ‘I'll come with you in case it's another journalist.’

They moved through the deathly still living room where the curtains were drawn, and to the front door. When Laura opened it, Erika heard a voice say, 'Hi Lor, we need to talk...'

Laura pulled the door open and Erika saw it was Oscar Browne. He was surprised to see her.

'DCI Foster was just here to ask about Mum,' said Laura.

'Right,' he said. He seemed to stand taller and become more formal. 'That's what I was here about. We need to go over a few things with regards to her legal defence.'

'Thank you detective,' said Laura giving Erika a smile. Oscar came inside.

'I can stay, if you want to talk over anything, I really don't think that the CPS is going to come down heavily on your mum after all she's been through, and she has no criminal record.'

'I need to talk to my client,' said Oscar. 'If you don't mind.' He moved to the door and held it open for Erika.

When she came up onto the street and got into her car, she thought she had something, but she couldn't keep hold of the thought and it slipped out of reach in her mind. She started the car and drove back to the station.

Erika spent the rest of the afternoon trying to make sense of the case, but didn't get anywhere. At six thirty, after spending a couple of hours listlessly flicking through the case files on her computer, she left for home.

When she came through the front door, Jakub and Karolina were playing a game of chase, screaming and running through the flat. The baby was crying, in concert with the washing machine, and the television was on full blast on the MTV channel. Lenka was dancing around with a muslin over her shoulder, the baby leant against it, trying to get her to calm down. Erika's heart sank, after months of coming home to a lonely flat all she wanted was some peace and quiet.

'Zlatko! You're home early!' cried Lenka, 'so you did what I told you for once.'

Erika went to the fridge and opened the freezer box.

'Where's my vodka?'

'I moved it, for the frozen vegetables. I was worried the bottle would break,' she replied. Spice up your Life by The Spice Girls came on MTV and Lenka leant down and turned it up even louder. The kids came charging through and ran up and over the sofa bed.

'Please can you just calm them down!'

‘You’re their aunt, you can talk to them a bit you know,’ snapped Lenka.

‘Why do they have to run over the furniture?’

‘It’s a bed, you know it’s okay for kids to jump on a bed.’ On cue the kids jumped on the sofa going mad to the music. Erika noticed that the ice cube tray had been dumped in the sink.

‘Why did you take the ice out?’

‘It’s the middle of November, what do you want ice for?’ Snapped Lenka transferring the screaming baby from one shoulder to another. The kids were now bounding higher and screaming their heads off along with The Spice Girls. Erika took a deep breath and went through to the bedroom. It was a tip, the bedclothes were bunched up in a ball, there were toys all over the floor, and a bag of dirty nappies were warming hideously by the radiator. Erika squeezed past the baby’s buggy and saw that her photo of Mark had been placed flat, and on the glass was a bottle of baby oil which had dripped over the glass. She grabbed the frame and unhooked the back. The oil had gone in and stained the top of the photo just above his head and down to his hair line.

Erika seized the photo and marched back into the living room, nearly colliding with the children as they ran past.

‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ shouted Erika.

Lenka turned and stared at the photo. ‘What?’

‘You put the baby oil bottle on my photo of Mark...’

‘Sorry, I’ll get you another one, have you got it on a USB key? There there, it’s okay, Auntie Erika is home.’

‘Lenka, I don’t have another copy of this photo... I took it on an old film camera,’ said Erika, her voice cracking.

‘So you have a husband who you miss more than life itself and yet you have a photo of him, which only exists as one copy!’

‘How can you fucking well say that!’ Erika shouted. The tears were rolling down her face.

‘You lord it over us all that you’re this amazing detective, but you have

one copy of the most precious photo in the world. I moved it from the changing table and you put it back there! You knew I was using it to change her nappy! You tell me it's okay to stay and you get all territorial over me.'

'How the hell is my photo in my house territorial?'

Lenka sneered at her and turned back to the TV. The baby had stopped crying and was staring at her with big eyes.

'Don't turn away from me, Lenka...'

Lenka stayed with her back to Erika.

'How much longer are you staying? Or is it all dependent on your stupid husband?'

'At least I have my husband's back...'

There was a horrible silence.

'What did you just say?'

'Erika, I didn't mean that,' said Lenka, her face dropping.

'I want you, and the kids out by the time I get back tomorrow morning. You hear!' Erika left the living room carrying the photo of Mark, grabbed her car keys and went out into the rain.

She started the engine and pulled away, unsure of where she was going to go.

Amanda Baker didn't notice the rain pouring outside her window, and the thunder flashing as she worked at her computer.

She didn't notice the car parked a few hundred yards along her street, the same car that had been watching her over the past few weeks.

She was filled with a feeling of youth, of being back on the case - she knew she wasn't, but being able to access the files online and hearing updates from DI Crawford had made her feel like something was happening in her life again. Like she was a police officer.

Amanda had always enjoyed the research, solving puzzles and reading people. Without the pressure of answering to top brass, or even the pressure to leave her house she felt in control.

She'd re-read through the case files, checking through witness statements, and she was now watching Trevor Marksman's video featuring Marianne and Laura Collins together in the park. She lifted her wine glass and saw that it was empty. She paused the image on the screen. It was the part where Marianne had just slapped Laura across the face. She heaved herself up and hurried through to the kitchen to get another glass of wine. When she opened the fridge she saw she'd drunk the last bottle of wine. She went to the small pantry and felt around in the Jacobs creek box, which had a hole in the top. It

was empty. She searched through the boxes on the floor in the darkness and was horrified to see that she'd run out of wine. She pulled the door open, and using her smartphone as a light, she scanned the shelves looking for something to drink. She was sure she had a bottle of taboo or baileys, which she didn't like, but it would have to do. The rain was lashing against the window and thunder was rumbling far off. She really didn't fancy setting out in that kind of weather.

She dragged a chair from the kitchen table and kicked the wine boxed out of the cupboard, and stood on it, she scanned the shelves of tins, bags of old pasta, out of date stocks cubes, and her phone came to rest on a box behind a small pile of OXO cubes. It was a very old Terry's Chocolate Orange. The small square box was covered in dust and she could see through the little plastic sphere that the chocolate inside had broken down and seeped through the foil. She didn't notice this, because it was what was written on the box that made her stop in her tracks.

'It's not Terry's, it's mine.' She repeated, reading the old tagline. She stepped down off the chair and walked through to the living room holding the box. 'It's not Terry's it's mine.' She repeated, almost in a trance. She suddenly rushed back to the computer, all thought of a drink of wine had gone. She played back the video a couple of times.

She then reached for the phone and called DI Crawford.

'I think I've worked it out,' she said. 'I need you to check something though...'

A HUNDRED YARDS down the street, Gerry sat in his car listening to the conversation as it unfolded between Amanda Baker and DI Crawford. When it was over, he called his boss.

'She knows. Amanda Baker knows. What should I do?'

'Make it look like an accident.'

Peterson stood in the tiny kitchen of his flat, wearing only a tiny hand towel around his waist. His fridge was empty. All he had were a can of spaghetti hoops and some mouldy bread. This was the first night he'd been able to get home early in several weeks, and he had realised he needed to do his laundry, just as much as he needed to buy food.

His flat was a small ground floor rental in a decent area of Sydenham. His neighbours were mostly made up of office workers, who left early and arrived home late, and a couple of old ladies, who always became a little twinkly eyed when they saw him. They'd discovered he was a policeman a few weeks after he'd moved in, and they were comforted by the fact they had a man of the law in their midst, and as his mate Dwayne had remarked, she probably fancied him too.

As he sighed and closed the fridge, his buzzer went. He thought it might be the old lady in question. She had pushed a note through his front door about coming to a neighbourhood watch meeting.

However, when he opened the door, it was Erika stood dripping wet.

'Boss, hi,' he said. He turned and picked up the underwear and a t-shirt, which was on the floor by the bathroom door.

'Sorry, have you got company?' she asked.

‘No, I’m just a slob,’ he grinned standing and trying to untangle the t-shirt. Erika’s eyes flicked down to where a silver St Christopher necklace hung between his smooth pectorals, and the dusting of hair on his washboard stomach.

‘Sorry, I was just out of the shower,’ he said pulling on the white t-shirt and nearly losing the tiny towel in the process. ‘Come in.’

‘No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come,’ she said turning to leave.

‘Boss, you’re soaked and it’s freezing. Let me at least give you a towel... I’ve got another one,’ he added looking at the one wrapped around his waist.

He showed her through to the living room as he went off to the bedroom. She looked around and saw it was very much a bachelor pad. There was a huge TV on a low table with a PlayStation and two controllers hooked up to it. Two of the walls were lined with bookshelves and crammed with a mixture of books and DVD’s. The furniture was black leather, and on the wall was a Pirelli 2016 calendar, still showing October. Peterson came back in wearing a white t-shirt and a pair of loose tracksuit bottoms. He smelt delicious.

‘What’s with the calendar?’ asked Erika pointing to the black and white picture of Yoko Ono sat on a stool wearing tights a jacket and a top hat.

‘Yeah, my mates usually get me the Pirelli every year... This year it’s gone all arty and conceptual.’

‘No birds with their tits out,’ grinned Erika.

‘Sadly, no,’ he grinned. His eyes flicked down to the front of her blouse and followed his gaze, mortified to see that she was drenched and her bra was showing through.

‘Shit,’ she said lifting the towel to cover herself.

‘It’s cool,’ he said. ‘You want a t-shirt? I can stick your blouse on the radiator?’

He left and came back with a dry t-shirt and went through to the kitchen. She went to a corner and quickly changed. He returned with two small

tumblers of whisky, as she was hanging her wet blouse over the small radiator under the window. Lightning flashed in the sky and the rain was blown in sheets against the window.

‘Here it will warm you up. It’s just a single so you won’t be over the limit,’ he said. She took a glass and they sipped. They came and sat down on the sofa.

‘Is everything okay with the case? I know it was a bit of a shit day,’ he said.

‘It’s fine, well not fine but...’

‘But?’

‘I don’t know why I’m here. I had a terrible argument with my sister.’

‘Sorry to hear that.’

‘Do I come across as a bitch?’

He blew out his cheeks, ‘well, you’ve got to head up a team of coppers, you’ve got to be tough.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that, Boss.’

‘Don’t call me boss, call me...’

‘Miss Ross,’ finished Peterson. They both burst out laughing, and then they smiled at each other. Erika looked down at her glass and when she looked up Peterson had moved closer he took the glass and placed it on the table in front. He leaned over and gently cupped her chin and kissed her. His lips were soft and warm and sensual, and there was just a light flicker of his tongue. He tasted of whisky and man, and she began to melt. Erika reached up and ran her hands down his firm muscular back, and hooked her fingers under his t-shirt. His skin was warm and smooth. His hands found their way under the t-shirt and his fingers moved slowly up to her bra strap. With a flick he’d opened her bra and it released her breasts. He moved his hand round and gently squeezed at her nipple. She moaned and lay back as he moved on top of her, their lips now pressed together.

Suddenly Mark's face came rushing at her. An image so clear, and she cried out.

'What? Are you okay? Did I hurt you?' said Peterson, moving back. She stared into his beautiful brown eyes and burst into tears. She leapt up and made for his tiny bathroom and locked herself inside. She sat on the edge of the bath and cried, huge heaving sobs wracking her body. She hadn't cried like this for so long and it felt good and bad at the same time. When her sobs had subsided, there was a soft knock at the door.

'Boss, I mean, Erika. You okay? I'm sorry if I was out of order,' came Peterson's voice. Erika moved to the mirror and wiped her face then opened the door.

'You didn't do anything. It's just hard to be a widow. Mark was my life, he was the live of my life and he's gone. He's never going to come back, and I spent everyday thinking about him... and it's exhausting, grieving and living with this huge gap. I'm human and I'd love nothing more than to just... with you, but there's guilt,' she shrugged and wiped her eyes again.

'Erika, we can just chill. Look, I can give you a minute, I'll go and whack off to that picture of Yoko Ono...'

She looked up at him grinning. 'Too early for a joke?' he added.

'No,' she smiled. 'A joke is what I need.'

She stood and looked at him leaning in the doorway with a smile. She stood and grabbed him and began to kiss him again. They moved off, him stumbling backwards, feeling their way together along the hallway, until they found the bedroom door and they collapsed onto the bed. And this time she didn't let him stop.

Lenka lay awake in the darkness, staring up at the ceiling and listening to the rain pelting down outside. Eva clucked and snuffled in her sleep, and she reached out a hand to check she was okay, stroking her soft head and fine hair.

The argument she'd had with Erika played heavy on her mind. She waited up until well after midnight, sitting in the dark living room with the children sleeping, but Erika didn't return. Just after midnight, she realised Erika had stormed out of the house without her phone when it had started to ring, but the battery had died mid-ring and she couldn't find the charger.

She knew that Erika had a friend, who was a Forensic Pathologist, but she couldn't remember his name, and she knew Mark's dad was called Edward Foster, and that he lived near Manchester. She worried for her sister, worried what the future held for her on her own.



ERIKA LAY with her head on Peterson's chest and felt his warmth and listened to the calm rhythmic beating of his heart. He stirred and pulled her close to him with his strong forearm. She felt shock, shock and a mixture of excitement and guilt that they'd had sex. Twice. The first time had been

intense and fast, and then almost straight away they'd done it again, slow and sensual. They'd fallen asleep soon afterwards, but she'd woken up an hour ago, and her mind had been whirring as she watched the digital clock in his bedroom. It was now 3.04 am. She snuggled into the crook of his arm, closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep.



LENKA ROLLED OVER IN BED, picked up her phone from the bedside table, and saw it was 3.05 am. She flopped back and put her arm over her face. She froze as she heard a noise, like the cracking of plastic. It came again and then there was a clink, which sounded like a thin metal bar coming free and hitting the floor. She jumped out of bed and scanned the room, the vacuum cleaner lay in the corner, the pipe coiled round and the metal bar was detached. She grabbed it and ran through to the living room.

The patio door had been pushed open, and she could see where the plastic had been removed to force it open. The curtains flapped in the strong breeze rushing through the gap. She turned with the metal pipe over her shoulder looking around the dark room, and unbelievably, the children were still asleep under the blankets.

There was a faint creak and Lenka felt a pair of powerful hands encircle her neck. Without thinking she screamed and swung the metal pipe up and over her shoulder. There was a crack and a yell. The kids then woke up and started screaming and Lenka turned to see the large shape of a man coming at her. She swung brought the pipe up and hit him in the crotch, it wasn't hard, but he groaned and it gave her enough time to really swing with some momentum and as he double over she brought it down with full force on his head. He fell to the floor and she brought it down again and again battering the man three times before he slumped forward and stopped moving.

Jakub and Karolina were now screaming and crying, and Lenka told them to go into the bathroom. Keeping her eye on the figure on the floor she

grabbed the landline from its charger and followed, still holding the pipe.

‘Lock the door,’ she said to the children. She ran past and grabbed baby Eva. When she came out the man was still on the floor. She joined the kids in the bathroom and locked the door.

‘It’s okay,’ she said to them as they crouched like two little frightened animals in the bath. ‘Karolina, I need you to help me and take Eva,’ she said. The little girl gulped and took the baby who was sleeping through all of the drama.

Lenka stared down at the phone and realised she didn’t know any numbers, she didn’t know how to call the police. The only number she knew was for Marek.

She sat against the door and dialled her husband’s number in Slovakia.

‘Mummy, the lock doesn’t work,’ whispered Jakub, his face white and trembling. ‘Auntie Erika said it was broken...’

As the phone began to ring Lenka heard a squeaking sound, and looked up. The door handle above her head was turning, and she felt the door give behind her back.

When Erika woke the next morning, Peterson had rolled away from her and slept on his side with all the covers bunched up around his bare legs. She saw it was 6.01am. So many emotions washed over her; guilt that she enjoyed being with Peterson, and a deep sadness that she was further apart from Mark. The memory had retreated a little, dimmer and further in the past now she had this new experience with another man. Her heart sank when she knew she would have to see Peterson today at work, and the next day... She sat up and retrieved her clothes from the floor beside the bed, pulling on her underwear. Peterson rolled over as she pulled the curtain to one side. It was still dark outside.

‘Morning. Don’t you want to stay for breakfast?’

‘No. I should go,’ she said doing up her bra.

‘Come here.’

‘Why?’

He sat up, ‘what do you mean why? I want to kiss you.’

Erika went to his side of the bed and perched on the edge. He put his arm around her.

‘We need to put down some boundaries,’ she said.

‘There didn’t seem to be many last night.’

‘I’m serious. I’m your boss. It would be easier if we didn’t talk about this at work.’

‘Oh, I was going to stand up today and address the incident room and tell everyone how great you are in the sack...’

‘Peterson.’

‘You are great in the sack,’ he said with a wink. She looked at him. ‘I’m not going to say anything...’

‘Good.’

‘Do you want to do this again?’

‘I don’t know. No. Can we just chalk it up to a great night?’

‘Chalk it up?’

Erika stood and fumbled around for her socks,

‘What do you want? A relationship? Because I am nowhere near wanting to do that.’

‘Fine,’ he said sitting up.

‘Fine. I’ll see you at work.’

‘Yes, boss,’ he said giving her a salute. He climbed past her out of bed and went to the bathroom shutting the door. She went to the living room and retrieved her blouse, and, leaving his t-shirt neatly folded, she let herself out of his flat.

Erika went to the drive through Mc Donald's in Sydenham and ordered a sausage and egg mc muffin and a cup of coffee and ate it in her car. When she came to pay, she saw that she didn't have her phone or wallet, and had used some spare change she kept for parking in her glove compartment.

Dawn was just breaking, cold and blue, as she pulled up at Manor Mount just after seven. Her heart began to hammer when she saw two police cars outside. She parked beside them on the gravel, and let herself in at the main entrance, feeling her heart race even faster when she saw her front door was open and a police officer was stationed outside. A tall figure in a blue forensics suit emerged carrying a long plastic evidence bag containing the pipe from her vacuum cleaner. Blood was crusted on the metal tubing and smeared over the plastic. In his other hand was one of her blood stained guest towels.

'Sorry, who are you?' asked the police officer. Putting out his hand to block her path. He was very young with a thin face and had a terrible razor rash.

'This is my home. Where is my sister and her kids?' she said feeling frantic and trying to move past him.

'This is now a crime scene,' he said pushing her back.

‘I’m a police officer... I haven’t got my ID...’ Moss appeared in the hallway dressed in blue scrubs. ‘Moss, what’s happening? Where is my sister and the three kids?’

Moss came to the threshold and stepped out, the officer gave her a clear plastic bag and she pulled off her mask and placed it inside.

‘Your sister and the kids are all fine. They’re upstairs with a neighbour. We managed to get a translator half an hour ago. They are all shaken but perfectly fine.’

‘Oh, thank God,’ said Erika wiping tears away with the back of her hand.

‘Where have you been, boss?’ asked Moss removing her overalls and placing them in the bag. They moved out into the communal entrance. ‘There was an emergency call logged at three thirty this morning from your landline... The operator didn’t know at first what was being said, but by a miracle one of the operators spoke Slovak.’

Moss went on to say that an intruder had broken in through the patio window and Lenka had attacked the person with the metal pipe from the vacuum cleaner.

‘He went down and she thought she had killed him. She locked herself and the kids in the bathroom and called 112, which luckily goes through to 999 emergencies. They stayed in the bathroom until police arrived. Whoever broke in was bleeding badly. They tried to get into the bathroom, left a lot of blood on the door. They must have fled the scene, because when we arrived there was no one.’

Erika slumped against the wall.

‘Was anything taken?’ she asked.

‘Not as far as we can see.’

‘Moss my bloody phone is in there, my bag, my laptop.’

‘Shit. Sorry Boss, you know the score. It’s a crime scene. I can see if we can get things fast tracked. Where are they?’

‘In my bag, probably by the TV.’

Moss radioed through to ask the officers inside to track the bag down.

‘Sorry, Boss I have to ask this. Why did you leave without any of your stuff? And where did you go?’

‘I had a huge row with my sister. It’s been stressful having them to stay. And I went to Peterson’s flat. I left here around seven thirty-ish. I drove around for a couple of hours and then I must have got to his around nine, nine thirty.’

‘Did you stay?’

Erika paused and looked at the floor, ‘I did.’

Moss was writing this down in her pocket book. She looked up at Erika,

‘Did you two, you know?’ she smiled.

‘Is that an official question?’

Moss closed her notebook, ‘No, it’s me getting excited that two of my favourite colleagues and friends might be getting it on!’ she grinned.

‘Can we concentrate on what is happening here?’

‘Yes, Boss. Blink once for yes and twice for no.’

‘Moss!’

‘Sorry, I won’t mention it again.’

‘Good. Can I see my sister?’

‘Course, Boss.’

ERIKA HAD NEVER MET her neighbour on the top floor, a cheerful blowsy woman called Alison. She was in her forties and had a mass of messy curls.

‘Ello,’ she said when she opened the door. ‘Your sister and the kids are in the lounge, shook up they are.’ She spoke with a soft Welsh accent and wore a flower print dress. Her flat was larger than Erika’s, and comfortable. Filled with rustic wooden furniture, books, and pictures of family. She took them through to the living room where Lenka sat on the sofa talking to the translator, a tall thin man wearing a green corduroy suit who perched on the

coffee table opposite. Eva was asleep in her arms and Karolina and Jakub were at either end of a long sofa. Between them was a huge elderly Rottweiler, asleep with his head on Karolina's lap and his back feet on Jakub.

'Erika,' said Lenka seeing her with Moss. Erika went over and hugged her and Eva.

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I stormed off like that,' said Erika.

'I'm sorry for what I said, I didn't mean it.'

'It's fine, we're all fine, everything is good and I love you,' said Erika. They hugged again, and then Erika went to the kids and asked if they were okay. They nodded solemnly. Karolina rubbed at the dog's big ear, and Jakub tilted his head where Erika was blocking his view to the cartoons on the TV.

'So everything is okay?' asked Moss. 'I couldn't understand a bloody word of that.'

'Nor could I, and I speak Welsh,' said Alison, adding, 'That's Duke by the way. He's seventeen, spends all day sleeping and farting... he didn't hear your intruder.'

'Thanks for letting them stay here this morning,' said Erika. 'Sorry I never came up to introduce myself...'

Alison batted her apologies away. 'It always takes a crisis to bring people together, you fancy a cuppa?'

Erika and Moss nodded.

THEY ALL SAT down with tea, and the translator departed now that Erika could translate what Lenka was saying.

'Did you get a look at whoever it was?' asked Erika.

'It was dark, but there was light coming in from outside, the streetlights,' said Lenka. She took a sip of tea and bit her lip.

'What is it?'

'You know I said the other day a man came to read the gas and electricity

meter?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I can’t be sure, and it was dark, but I saw his profile, and it looked like the same man.’

It was early afternoon when Erika arrived at Bromley Station. She'd booked Lenka into a hotel with the kids, a decent one she'd found in Dulwich. Marek was flying into London Stanstead Airport later that afternoon. They were going to get a couple of hours sleep, and then an e-fit photo artist was going over to work with Lenka on a likeness for the intruder, and the man who came to read the meter.

THE INCIDENT ROOM WAS BUSY, and everyone stopped working when Erika came through the door.

'It's all right, I'm okay. No one has been hurt, apart from the intruder who was seen off expertly by my sister. It runs in the family...'

She looked around the room at John, DC's Knight and Temple, at Moss who gave her a nod and a smile and then Peterson who just stared back at her. 'It's business as usual. We still have a case to solve, so let's get to it.'

She went to her office. Moss followed after her with a black bag. 'Boss, I got your iPhone back from forensics, with your laptop. The bag didn't look like it had been touched.'

Erika placed it on her desk. She opened it and pulled out her iPhone

seeing that the battery was dead, and she hooked it up to the charger she kept in the office.

‘They’ve taken blood samples the intruder left on your carpet, so we’ll see what comes back, hopefully we can get a match from the DNA database.’

Erika switched on her phone. Moss went on,

‘It’s troubling that whoever did this scouted out your place first. But at the same time nothing was taken.’

Erika’s phoned chimed several times, and she picked it up and swiped through. There were calls from Lenka, and five calls from an unknown number, plus a voicemail.

‘Is there anything else, Boss?’ asked Moss.

‘No, thanks. I’m just going to get myself up to speed with things,’ said Erika. Moss left and she sat down to listen to the voicemails, thinking it might be Peterson, calling her from his landline. She peered through the walls of the glass office at her team milling about, but she couldn’t see Peterson.

She was surprised to hear the first voicemail was from DCI Amanda Baker, saying she had some important information for her regarding the Jessica Collins case, and to call her back urgently. Amanda had called her a further five times during the early hours of the morning, leaving another message.

She pressed call, but Amanda’s mobile went straight to voicemail. She logged onto her computer and pulled up the phone directory and put in Amanda’s address. She tried the landline number, but it rang out.

Erika got up and called John over.

‘Can you keep trying these two numbers. They’re for Amanda Baker, when she answers can you put her through to me straight away.’

‘Yes, Boss,’ he said.

Erika went back to her desk and tried to get her head back into the Jessica Collins case. She looked through the notes she had made over the last few days, taking in the arrest of Joel Michaels, who was still in custody at the

station. And she looked through the notes of her meeting with Laura Collins.'

There was a knock on the glass and Peterson opened the door. He held a cardboard tray with two coffees from the Starbucks at the top of the high street. He moved to her desk and placed one in front of her.

'What's this?' she asked.

'I got you a coffee.'

'I didn't ask for one.'

'You looked like you could do with one...'

Erika pushed it across the desk towards him. 'Peterson, what are you doing?'

'Can't I get you a coffee?'

'Are you getting me a coffee as your Boss or as your, I don't know, one night stand?'

'That's not fair. I'm just getting you a coffee, read into it what you will. And last night was special...'

'We are not talking about last night here in the bloody incident room!'

Just then Moss appeared at the door.

'I was just going to run across the road for coffee, do you guys...' he voice tailed off. 'Oh. Did I miss the coffee run?'

'I've just been,' said Peterson.

'You went all the way up to Starbucks?' She asked, seeing the cups. She then looked between Erika and Peterson and grinned, 'Oh... I see, he's a keeper.'

'Moss can you come in here and close the door behind you,' said Erika. She waited until the door was shut. 'Look. This is not a dating game, I don't want to hear my or Peterson's private life discussed here. There's no office romance to follow or be a part of...'

Moss nodded, 'Yes boss... but look he got you brown and white sugar, a napkin; he's even balanced one of those little tea stirrer sticks on the top. That's sweet.'

‘Piss off, Moss,’ said Peterson.

‘Just get back to work, both of you,’ said Erika. When they’d gone she stared at the coffee for a moment and then relented and took a sip. She picked up the phone and called Isaac Strong. He was at work and answered after a couple of rings,

‘What do you know about a drug called Halcion?’ she asked.

‘The generic name is Triazolam; Halcion is the original brand name. It’s a central nervous system depressant in the benzodiazepine class. It’s similar in composition to other benzodiazepines, but it’s generally only used as a sedative to treat severe insomnia. Why, have you seized some?’

‘No. I saw it was prescribed to Marianne Collins. I wanted to know what it was.’

‘Prescribed?’

‘Yes, Laura said that their GP had been to see Marianne after the incident outside the station, and prescribed it for her to calm her down and help her sleep.’

‘Are you sure it was Halcion?’

‘I saw the box in their kitchen bin. I wrote it down when I got back to the car with my notes.’

‘Erika, Halcion has been illegal in the UK since the early nineties. No GP would risk giving their patient a banned drug...’

There was a knock at Erika’s door, it was Peterson,

‘What it is? I’m on the phone...’

‘Boss, there’s been an emergency call-out to Amanda Baker’s house. The postman went to do his delivery this afternoon at her front room window but she wasn’t there. He thinks he can see something through her window...’

‘What?’

‘He thinks he can see her feet suspended above the floor in the hallway.’

Erika drove fast with the blue lights and sirens blaring, ducking and weaving through the traffic in Catford, and shooting over three sets of red lights. Rain spotted the front windscreen, and Peterson expertly braced his arms against the inner door and seat.

‘Are we cool?’ he said as they flew across a busy crossroads, water spraying up either side of the car.

‘Yes, we’re cool,’ she grinned, not taking her eyes off the road.

A POLICE CAR was waiting outside Amanda Baker’s house. One of the officers was talking to the Postman, a middle-aged man who stood resting his bag on the gatepost, looking shaken. A couple of neighbours were watching from their front doors, as another officer was peering through the grimy glass of the front door.

‘I tried to force it, the lock looks crap but it won’t budge,’ she said to Erika and Peterson as they came down the front path flashing their ID’s.

‘There’s newspapers stacked up against it on the other side. Erika leaned over and peered at the frosted glass, but couldn’t make out anything. They came to the front and Peterson looked at the window.

‘The lock’s been fixed,’ he said peering through, ‘and I can see a pair of feet, just through the doorway from the hall.

‘Okay, let’s try the back,’ said Erika.

They made their way round and through the fence, down the side passage and into the back garden. The back door stood open.

‘Can you call for backup,’ said Erika quietly. The officer nodded and reached for his radio. As he put in the call, Erika and Peterson went into the kitchen. It was a worse mess than their last visit, and despite the cold weather, several flies hovered over a mound of dirty dishes. A tap dripped into one of the dirty saucepans, but apart from this the house was silent.

He kitchen door was closed and they made their way toward it, slowly. The uniform officer caught up with them and slipped the baton from the back of his belt. He moved to go first and open the door.

There was a strange creaking sound that made them stop.

‘This is the police, come out with your hands raised,’ said the officer gripping the baton. There was silence for a moment, and then the creaking came again louder, it rose and then there was a ripping sound a snap and an almighty thud shook the floorboards. It was followed by the sounds of debris crashing down the stairs.

They stood for a moment longer as the silence rang out. The officer looked back and Erika gave him a nod. He opened the door swiftly, and they saw Amanda Baker’s body lying at a gruesome angle on the hall carpet. She wore just a white patterned nightgown with blue socks. Her left arm and shoulder were trapped under her back and her right leg was dislocated at the knee. She was covered in dust and chunks of plaster, and a square of thin wood lay nearby. It was the loft hatch.

‘It broke away from the ceiling,’ said Peterson pointing up to a gaping hole in the ceiling at the top of the stairs. A fine rain of plaster dust rained down.

They looked back at Amanda’s body and saw her face was purple and

bloated, there was a noose tight around her neck, and her eyes were still open.

‘Do you think this was suicide?’ asked Erika. A few hours had passed and Isaac Strong was attending the crime scene with Nils Akerman and his team of CSI’s.

‘Death was by asphyxiation. The neck is elongated and you can see the deep groove in the neck,’ said Isaac gently tilting the victims head.

‘My only problem is that we found a glass tumbler on the carpet at the top of the stairs, with a residue of what smells like coca cola. There’s a corresponding splash on the wall,’ said Isaac. ‘We’ll need to check what was in the glass, it could have been that some kind of drug was dissolved in the drink... or that she was taken by surprise.’

Erika and Peterson looked back at Amanda. Isaac went on,

‘There is a bruise in the centre of the lower back which concerns me, and the use of the stairs can mean suicide or foul play. She’s wearing a nightgown, which could mean she got up in the night, there was someone here and in the darkness she walked into the noose. The bruise in the lower back could be where she was shoved off the top step.’

Peterson got up and went to the loft hatch which lay halfway up the stairs, attached to the other end of the rope

‘The rope was tied to the inside of the loft hatch. There’s a metal bar still

attached to the other side of this hatch, a bracket for a pull-down ladder,' he said. 'And the hatch has one of those pull down latches which can be opened with a pole with a hook on the end.'

Erika looked around at the mess of plaster and dust in the hallway.

'Any chance of a time of death Isaac?' asked Erika.

'I'll know more when I've had a closer look,' he said. The crime scene photographer moved in and the hallway lit up as he took pictures.

Nils appeared in the living room doorway,

'I think you'll want to take a look at this,' he said.

They followed him through and saw that the living room was much the same as the last time they saw it. Only the laptop had been removed from its stand, the charger still hung over the metal stand and was plugged in.

'Her mobile phone is missing, and the landline in the hall has been removed,' said Nils. 'But her purse is still on the counter in the kitchen beside the kettle. It's got two hundred pounds still inside and all the credit cards.'

'So it wasn't a robbery.'

'There's no sign of forced entry,' added Nils.

'The kitchen door was still open when we arrived,' said Peterson.

'But if the person came through the kitchen, they would have seen the purse there.'

Erika noticed something on the top of the computer stand, and she went over, pulling a pair of latex gloves from her pocket.

'She wasn't the thinnest person,' said Peterson as she picked the small box of a Terry's Chocolate Orange. Erika noticed that the chocolate inside was well past its use by date, it had solidified and was oozing out of the orange foil.

'She hasn't opened it,' said Erika. 'And look, the slogan on the box has been underlined with a permanent marker.'

'It's not Terry's, it's mine,' said Nils joining them and reading over

Erika's shoulder. 'This is very old. I eat at least one chocolate orange a week, I am an addict,'

'How do you keep so thin?' asked Erika.

Nils shrugged.

He took it from her and turned the box over. 'Best before end 11th November 2006,' he read. 'Perhaps she was saving it for a rainy day. It certainly pissed down last night.'

'Why underline the writing on the box?' asked Erika. Peterson and Nils looked back at her and shrugged.

WHEN ERIKA and Peterson came back out to the car, they sat for a moment, watching as the body was brought from the house in a black body bag on a metal stretcher.

'I want her Internet history and access to her phones. I want to see what she was looking at, and who she was talking to before she died,' said Erika.

'We should check with Isaac if she has any chocolate orange in her stomach too.'

Erika shot him a look, 'I'm serious,' he added.

'*It's not Terry's, it's mine...*I know it sounds hokey, but there's something wrong here. Why would she call me to say she's found something and then she's found dead?'

Afternoon turned to evening and nothing came back from forensics, Amanda Baker's phone company or her Internet provider. Erika was back in the incident room, watching the light fade on yet another day.

The she received a call from Marsh.

'Erika, I've been asked to get some more information on what exactly is going on with your case. The Assistant Commissioner is concerned you have lost control of the investigation. Erika outlined what had happened.

'Do you think the intruder in your house and the discovery of Amanda baker's body could be linked? Perhaps you're getting close to something.'

'That's my theory, but forensics is slow, and I'm waiting on phone records. I'm hoping that my sister will be able to provide a likeness with the e-fit artist...'

'Either way, Erika, you need to pull a rabbit out of the hat very soon. You wanted to bring in Joel Michaels as a suspect and the one day he is in custody and Trevor Marksman is in hospital this happens.'

'I know, Sir.'



ERIKA ARRIVED BACK at the hotel in Dulwich just before seven. She had wanted

to stay later, but Moss and Peterson insisted she go back to be with her sister and the kids. The hotel was very small, and situated on a smart residential street in Dulwich. When Erika went up to the room where Lenka was staying, she was just finishing up with the e-fit artist and the translator. The kids were asleep on the bed in front of a Disney DVD.

‘This is what we got,’ said the artist. He turned his laptop around to face Erika. She put her bag down and leaned in to the image. It was a man with a thin athletic face, a strong nose and jaw. He had wide set eyes and a smattering of stubble on his face.

‘You saw stubble?’ asked Erika.

‘When I hit him over the head, he went down and I saw he had a stubbly face,’ said Lenka. When the e-fit artist had gone, they opened a bottle of wine and sat in the corner of the room.

‘I should wake them up soon, or they won’t sleep,’ said Lenka. Marek is due to be arriving very soon.

‘What are you going to say to him?’ asked Erika.

‘I don’t know. My only option is to go back. I don’t speak the language. I’m in the way here.’

‘You are not in the way, I promise,’ said Erika. Marek arrived an hour later, he’d got a cab from the airport.

He was on his best behaviour, and greeted Erika warmly. He even had some food for her, a jar of his mother’s jam.

‘Thank you,’ said Erika. The kids woke up and were so excited to see him, and when he cuddled them and picked baby Eva up, Erika excused herself and went to find the room she was booked into.

She was dozing off just before eleven, with her laptop on her knee, when her phone rang.

‘Hi Erika, it’s Lee Graham from Cybercrime.’

Erika rubbed her eyes and sat up. ‘Hi Lee, I thought you were based over in Brighton now?’

‘No, back in London. I get around.’

‘I bet you do.’

Erika had worked with Lee on several cases over the past few years, and she enjoyed flirting with him. Probably because she thought it wouldn’t ever go anywhere.

‘I saw the request had gone out for phone and email records.’

‘I take it you managed to find something?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I’ve got Amanda Baker’s Internet usage records from her provider. Nothing dodgy, but she’s been accessing HOLMES several times a day over the last week.’

‘HOLMES? That can’t be right, she wouldn’t have access. She left the force years ago.’

‘She’s been accessing HOLMES through the login and password registered to a DI Simon Crawford...’

‘Shit.’

‘You know this officer?’

‘Yes.’

‘Her phone records also show that she’s been making and receiving calls to DI Crawford over the past three weeks too.’

‘He was assigned three weeks ago to my case,’ said Erika.

‘Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. It looks like she’s been poking her nose in. I’ve got a full list of her Internet history over the past month. It really picks up over the past few days. I’m also sending through the phone records.’

‘Thanks,’ said Erika. When she came off the phone she only had to wait a few minutes before the email came through, and then she started to read with interest.

When Erika arrived at the station the next morning, she was the first in the incident room. She watched as everyone arrived and just before eight she emerged from her office and called everyone to attention, and explained the findings from Amanda Baker's phone records.

'So this brings me on to the question, where is DI Crawford?' finished Erika. She looked around the room at her officers.

'Boss, Crawford didn't come into work yesterday,' said John.

'Did no one think to tell me?'

'You came in after lunch, after all the chaos, and then DCI Baker's body was discovered...'

'Ok. I want you to call him, I also want you to put in a request for his phone and his Internet records. I also want access his access to HOLMES suspended. I've put Amanda Baker's internet records up on the system and the list of what she's accessed over the past few days. I want you to divide it up and go through it, even if it looks innocent I want to see everything that she saw.' Peterson I want you to be in charge of this, okay?'

Peterson nodded. John looked up at Erika from his phone,

'Boss, I've just tried DI Crawford's house and his mobile, he's not answering either of them.'

‘Okay, Moss you come with me, let’s make a house call.’

IT WAS RAINING YET AGAIN when Erika and Moss drove from Bromley to where Crawford lived between Beckenham and Sydenham.

‘I have a bad feeling about this,’ said Moss, when they arrived outside his flat.

‘Is this it?’ asked Erika peering up out of the front window. They were on Beckenham Hill Road, which was a busy main road. It was crammed with a long row of pound shops, newsagents, and betting shops, a few crummy launderettes, and an Iceland supermarket. It was also on several major bus routes.

‘I can’t park outside, there’s a couple of buses behind me.’ She drove a little further up and pulled into a Mc Donald’s car park. They hurried out and waited for a couple of minutes to cross the busy road. Crawford lived in a flat above a payday loans shop. It was a white front door that opened directly onto the street. They found his flat number in the long row of doorbells and rang, but there was no answer. A man came out of the door, and Erika and Moss slipped in after him.

A staircase with a grubby carpet wound its way up four flights. Crawford was on the top floor. When they reached the third floor, a door was open, and they could hear the sound of a Chinese lady shouting. A grey haired man came to the door, followed by the woman who was small and ferocious.

‘You plumber, but you not fix this leak?’

‘I told you, it’s coming from the flat above, and the person isn’t in.’ He said to her wearily.

‘Hi, I’m DCI Foster and this is DI Moss,’ said Erika as they flashed their badges. ‘There’s no one answering upstairs?’

‘Thas’ what he just said,’ snapped the woman. ‘There’s leak in my kitchen, big leak. It spread since last night all across the ceiling...’

Erika looked at Moss and then made for the stairs.

It took just two attempts for Erika to kick down the door. Crawford lived in a studio apartment. The bed was unmade under a window looking down onto the main road, and there were flies buzzing around above dirty pots and pans in the kitchen in the corner. On the wall were a picture collage of Crawford with two kids, a boy and a girl who were in their early teens. The pictures had been taken over the years, starting with a photo of what looked like the main gates at Disneyland Paris.

‘He’s divorced,’ said Moss. ‘I heard him moaning about his ex wife a couple of weeks back.’

They noticed a large wet patch on the carpet outside the bathroom door. It was slightly ajar, and they moved slowly across to it. Erika pushed it open and they saw in the tiny bathroom that the bath was full to the brim. DI Crawford’s naked body floated in the water, which was stained red. One of his arms flopped out and over the side, and they could see he had slashed his wrists.

Two days later, Erika attended the mortuary with Moss and Peterson. Both Amanda Baker and DI Crawford's bodies were laid out side by side on the stainless steel mortuary tables. Isaac was waiting for them, weary after performing both autopsies through the night.

'What disturbs me about both of these deaths, is that whoever did this, made a very weak attempt to pass them off as suicides,' said Isaac. 'It's almost like they're mocking us.'

'You don't think they were suicide?'

'No, I don't,' he said. He moved to Amanda Baker first. She lay under a white sheet, and she was placed on her front. It was only when Isaac pulled down the sheet that they saw the angry weals around her neck.

'You can see here the usual kind of bruising I would expect to see from a hanging, the rope has bitten deep into the skin and left a very clear and defined line,' he said indicating the line running around her neck. 'If you can see here, there is a series of small circular bruises at the nape of the neck. This indicated to me that the noose was placed over her head, tightened, and then she fought, the knot of the noose moving and creating a ring of bruises. You can also see the bruise at the base of her spine...' he moved down and gently pulled the sheet back. 'We also recovered some skin cells from

underneath her left hand fingernails. This indicated she fought with an attacker...’

Isaac paused and then moved over to the body of DI Crawford. He lay on his back, his hair combed back from his forehead. His arms lay out of the sheet and beside him.

‘You see here, there are two long incisions one on each arm. They are horizontal as opposed to vertical, and each cut severed the radial artery, the main artery that supplies blood to the arms and hands. It was done with a straight-razor, or what you might call an old barber shop razor.’

Moss grimaced at the sight of the two long slashes in the arms, which had been neatly stitched up.

‘He had high levels of alcohol in his blood, and also traces of the sedative Halcion...’

‘We talked about Halcion the other day,’ said Erika.

‘Yes, it is illegal in the UK, but not so in the USA, and it’s possible to get hold of it online.’

‘So he got drunk, took the sedative and slit his wrists? He seemed on edge the last few days he was in work, well he seemed distracted for the whole time he was on the case,’ said Moss.

‘He didn’t slit his wrists,’ said Isaac.

‘How can you tell?’

‘The barbershop, straight razor was found on the edge of the sink. It had been wiped clean, there were no prints.’

‘Couldn’t he have done that himself?’

‘He could have, but there would have been torrents of blood when he sliced open the radial artery. He would have had to use a cloth or a tissue, there were no bloody cloths or tissues found at the scene and the bloodletting was confined to the bath water and the tiles surrounding the bath. Whoever did this, wanted to make it look like a suicide, but also pass on the message that it wasn’t so.’

‘And they were both discussing the Jessica Collins case in the lead up to their murders,’ said Erika.

‘There’s more I have to tell you,’ said Isaac. He moved over to the long counter by the sink where he had some paperwork.

‘We were able to test the skin cells from under Amanda Bakers fingernails, we got a positive match on a Jayden Quince. He’s ex army, served in Iraq and then was discharged shortly afterwards. He was charged with GBH four years ago, hitting a man in a club in the west end. He had his DNA taken then and its been stored on the database.’

‘That’s fantastic,’ said Erika.

‘I suggest you send forensics back into DI Crawford’s flat and do a complete swab.’

‘This is such good work, Isaac,’ said Erika.

‘There’s one more thing; the DNA matches the blood taken from your flat the other night when the intruder broke in. It’s the same man. I think he was coming for you too.’

Gerry had been keeping a low profile. He'd bled badly from the cut behind his ear, where the woman had hit him. She'd knocked him unconscious, and he didn't know how long he had been out when he came to on the carpet in the darkness. Then he'd heard her in the bathroom with the two kids who were whimpering.

He knew something was badly wrong when he staggered to his feet. The room was spinning and lurching to one side, he went to the bathroom and tried the door, but he felt himself losing consciousness. He gripped the handle and pushed. The door had given a little and he'd staggered back hitting the floor hard, pain coursing up his tailbone.

The kids inside the bathroom were crying, she was trying to quiet them down. His mind raced, calculating the possibilities. He could kill the woman, but what about the kids. When he agreed to this, it didn't include kids. And there was a baby. He'd blacked out again, and when he came to he could hear the far off sound of police sirens.

Abort, he had to abort, he decided. He ran from the flat and out into the garden. The route he'd planned out before stayed in his mind and he moved through several dark gardens. He stopped in a large garden, filled with trees and bushes and found a pond, shimmering like ink in the darkness. He leaned

over and washed the blood from the side of his face. The cold water felt good on his skin. He then moved on, and found his car parked in a back street.

HE'D LAIN low in the small house he rented, he slept, he gathered his strength and now on the third morning he knew it was time. He went to the tiny bathroom and flicked on the light above the mirror. The bruise had gone down on the side of his face. He'd done a rough job tacking together the three inch cut on the side of his head with surgical glue, and the iodine he'd swapped over it, against his cappuccino coloured skin had a green tint.

He took a shower and then walked through to the small kitchen. On the table was a Glock 17 handgun, and £8000 in unmarked bank notes.

Gerry was smart and he could be greedy, but his intelligence told him that it was time to end this. His mobile phone rang on the table beside the cash. He picked it up.

'Where the fuck have you been?' came the familiar voice. He was silent. 'Are you there?'

'I'm here.' He replied.

'You were supposed to do all three of them. Two suicides and a home invasion. Not only did you fail on the latter, but also the Foster woman will find out. She's not stupid.'

'I'm out,' said Gerry.

'What do you mean? You're out? You need to finish the fucking job. I won't pay you a penny more.'

'Keep the rest of the money. I'm out.'

'It's not just the money, you know.'

'You've been holding this over my fucking head for so long, and I've had enough. There's two sides to every story and if I go down, so will you. I just realised I've nothing to lose by walking away.'

With that Gerry ended the call. He opened the pre-paid phone and took

out the SIM card breaking it neatly into four.

He now had to move fast. He figured he had a day, maybe less before his DNA profile would come back, and he had to prepare his escape.

Erika sat across from Superintendent Yale in his office. He looked exhausted. His face was pale, and he had large dark circles under his eyes.

‘Sir. I don’t need you to divert any more resources my way,’ she said. He held up his hand,

‘Erika, I don’t think that stationing a police car outside the hotel you are staying at will break the bank. We’ve already had a stabbing in broad daylight on the front steps of the station and one of my officers has been found dead in suspicious circumstances. You’ve given me much bigger fish to fry... I take it you’ve heard about Jason Tyler?’

‘What is it?’

‘He was refused bail and taken to Belmarsh, someone heard he was going to give evidence for a plea bargain, and they got to him. He was stabbed in the leg with a shank.’

‘How did someone get hold of a shank?’

‘You’re not going to believe this. Kit Kats, or should I say the foil the two finger Kit Kats come wrapped in. Some bright spark has been saving them up for months and fashioned a lethal spiked shank with what must have been a few hundred foil wrappers. Tyler was stabbed in the thigh, bled out in the showers, and now his empire dies with him.’

There was a knock and one of the support staff came in with a cup of tea in his 'Who's The Boss?' mug.

'There we are, Sir,' she said. 'And I brought you your favourite.' She placed a Kit Kat on the desk beside the steaming cup of tea and left.

Erika had a sudden urge to laugh, it took every bit of control to keep a straight face as he swept it off the desk and into the waste paper basket.

'It seems it all hangs on you now, DCI Foster, let's hope you get some kind of resolution to your case. I'll have the car stationed outside your hotel in time for your return.'

'Very good, Sir,' said Erika. She got up and left and halfway down the corridor, she dived into the ladies toilets and she burst out laughing, she leaned on the sink and she couldn't stop. A toilet flushed, and one of the uniformed officers came out of a cubicle and went to the sink. She was the one who had been collecting money for Guy Fawkes. She was ready for her shift, and wearing a Kevlar stab vest over her uniform.

'You okay ma'am?' she asked moving to the sink and washing her hands. Erika saw the vest, and immediately stopped.

'Yes, sorry. It's been a long hard day.'

'It's been a long hard week, ma'am,' she said. She dried her hands and went to leave.

'Be careful out there, won't you... ' Erika found herself saying.

'PC Claremont...'

'PC Claremont, keep your wits about you.'

'I always do. Thanks Boss,' said the young officer and then left. Erika washed her hands and then went back up to the incident room.

MOSS CAME over to her when she came through the door,

'Boss, we've had DI Crawford's phone records back, they confirm her was in contact with Amanda Baker over the last few weeks. We managed to

find Amanda Baker's phone. It had fallen down the side of her bed, so whoever was looking for it slipped up. The Cyber Crime guys have given it the once over and they found it was hacked in the last couple of weeks using a Trojan horse programme. Someone has been listening in and monitoring what she's been looking at online.'

'Good work.'

'We just had some of our guys go back to the house, and they found a small listening device in the smoke alarm.'

'Someone knew she was getting close to who killed Jessica Collins,' said Erika.

Erika returned to the hotel in Dulwich and said an emotional goodbye to Lenka and the kids. It was dark outside and for once it wasn't raining.

'You know you're welcome to stay,' said Erika as they hugged on the street outside. Marek was waiting in the car with the kids.

'Marek says things have calmed down, he's sorted it with the police.'

'If I was a police officer back in Slovakia, I wouldn't be sorting things out with career criminals.'

'I know.'

'He loves you though, and the kids,' said Erika watching as Marek helped them with their seat belts. 'That's got to count for something.'

Lenka shrugged, 'I just have to get on with life. I have to face up to whatever happens,' she said.

'You'll keep in touch?'

'Course,' she smiled. 'Let me know what happens with the hunky policeman.'

'Don't be silly.'

'No. You deserve happiness. Mark would agree with me. You can't spend the rest of your life in the past.'

'Love you, safe journey,' said Erika.

‘Love you too,’ replied Lenka.

She watched sadly as they drove away, the kids waving from the back window. She turned to see a squad car pull up at the kerb. She went over to it and knocked on the window, it wound down to show a young red haired officer.

‘Change of plan, I’m going back to my flat,’ she said.

Erika had been back at her flat for a couple of hours, when the buzzer went. When she looked through the spy hole, she saw Peterson's face, magnified as he peered through. She sighed and unlocked the door.

'Hey, how you doing?'

'Fine.'

'I stopped by your hotel in Dulwich, they said you'd checked out. This was warm when I got there...' he held up a white plastic bag.

'Is that Chinese?'

He nodded. 'It's all the good stuff, too. Crispy chilli beef, Chicken Chow Mein, crispy seaweed, prawn crackers.'

'Damn you. How did you know I wouldn't have any food in?'

She stood to one side and let him in. He saw she had been tidying the flat. The sofa bed was stacked with folded bedding, and there was a wet pink circle on the carpet with a can of carpet foam next to it. The light fitting had been unscrewed, so had the lamp on the table by the television. The housing for both smoke alarms lay in pieces on the coffee table.

'I just phoned my letting agency. They didn't know about anyone coming to read the gas or electricity meter.'

'You think someone came in and bugged you?' asked Peterson putting

the Chinese food down on the counter and opening the cupboards.

‘Plates are all dirty,’ she said.

‘Oh my god, what is this?’ he said looking at a pile of greying stuff on a plate.

‘My sister made Bryndzove Halusky... It obviously doesn’t look like that when it’s fresh...’

He started to chip at it with the end of a fork. Erika lit a cigarette and stared at the room. ‘He would have had to have been quick.’

‘Who?’

‘The meter man. My sister and the kids were all here when he came. Although they were in the garden.’

‘Did you check the housing for the electricity box?’

‘Yes, there’s nothing.’

Peterson washed a couple of plates and they sat down on the sofa. Erika started to shovel the food in. She reached for the remote, and it took a few attempts to get the television to switch on. Peterson leaned over and took the remote.

‘Choose what you want,’ she said through a mouthful of prawn crackers. He turned the remote over and took of the back where the batteries were kept, and opened it.

‘Well I’ll be damned,’ he said. He pulled out a small circle of metal with a tiny length of wire.

‘Jesus,’ said Erika putting her fork down. ‘I thought I was being paranoid.’

AN HOUR LATER, they had finished eating, and they were sat with Erika’s computer and the logs of Amanda Bakers phone calls and internet search history.

‘I received a blank text, about a week ago. It was on the same day that

Lenka was calling me to say she'd be coming here,' said Erika.

'You need to stop using your phone then,' said Peterson handing over her iPhone. She switched it off.

'What is it that Amanda found out? This case seems to be retreating further and further from me.'

'Whatever it was, it was a big enough deal for someone to kill her, and Crawford, and for an attempt on your life too.'

'Joel Michaels was in custody when it happened. Trevor Marksman was and still is in hospital... We had to release Michaels earlier today.'

'Let's take her search history and go through it line by line,' said Peterson. They spent the next few hours poring over everything.

'One of the videos keeps coming up, of Laura and Marianne in the park. And she's accessed it at the seventh minute, and the forty third minute.'

'Let's take a look then,' said Peterson. They logged into HOLMES and found the video file. In both videos Laura and Marianne could be seen arguing, their voices were faint. Erika dragged the video back and to the same point and turned up the volume to full. The sounds of the kids screaming and laughing in the park boomed out, so did the squeak of the swings going back and forward.

'What's that Laura is saying, you don't get to boss me around... her either...'

'Yeah, her voice is louder, Marianne's is pretty inaudible.'

They played it back again, and Erika repeated what she heard,

'You don't get to boss me around... not yours... mine...' she stopped the video. And she got up, her mind whirring. 'What is it?' asked Peterson.

'Not yours, mine... not yours, mine. There was that chocolate orange box by Amanda's computer.'

'She was a big lady, wasn't she just craving something sweet? My mum has been known to eat stuff out of the bin she's thrown away.'

'No. She hadn't opened it. She'd underlined...' Erika scabbled around

for the photo from the crime scene. 'Here look, she'd underlined that tagline they used to use in the adverts, 'It's not Terry's, it's mine.'

'You think there was someone called Terry involved?' asked Peterson watching her pace up and down, the cogs turning.

'Forget that... Shit,' she said standing still. She turned to Peterson. 'What was the age difference between Laura and Jessica?'

'Jessica was seven, Laura was twenty when Jessica... Shit.'

Eirka scabbled for the print out, 'how much of this has been checked through?'

'I don't know. What are you looking for?'

'A web address with the .ie domain,'

'Here, give me some,' said Peterson, they spent a few minutes scanning each page of the tiny print.

'Got it,' said Erika. She moved to the laptop and typed in the web address; <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/1/bdm/Certificates/>

'Here look, she tried to search for a birth certificate. She wouldn't have had access, so she went this application page, you can do online applications as they're public documents.'

'Due to a significant increase in orders for certificates as a result of the recent referendum in the United Kingdom (UK), the delivery time for certificates from this service will be up to thirty (30) days from the date of order,' read Peterson. 'So she didn't find out, that's when she phoned you.'

Erika picked up her phone and then remembered,

'Use mine, I'm not hacked,' said Peterson. Erika grabbed his phone and then called in to control, and asked about getting hold of the birth certificate for Jessica Collins. She was told that they don't have access to Irish birth certificates and they would have to wait until 8am the next morning until the office is open.

'Shit. Are we out on a limb here? Wouldn't someone have picked up on it?'

‘The first investigation was a disaster, and why would anyone think of looking at her birth certificate? When we do we look at Birth and death certificates? Only when there is something fishy going on.’

‘You think its possible? That Laura was never Jessica Collins sister, she was her mother...’

Erika and Peterson stayed up until very late, working their way through the case files, and re-visiting witness statements. They grabbed a few hours sleep on the sofa, and then drove to the station first thing in the morning.

They left the flat at the same time, but in separate cars to drive to Bromley, and the fact Peterson had stayed the night was registered by the surprise on the officer stationed outside the flats in the squad car.

‘OKAY EVERYONE, I want your attention,’ said Erika to her team when they had all congregated in the incident room. ‘A few minutes ago I put in a request to the Irish records office for a copy of Jessica Collins’ birth certificate. We have reason to suspect that Laura Collins wasn’t Jessica’s sister, she was, in fact her mother.’

There was silence in the incident room. Erika went on to explain their hunch from the previous evening.

‘Boss, there’s a fax coming through for you, I’m just sending it to the printers,’ said John. Erika went to the printer at the back of the incident room and it seemed to take an age for it to start whirring and printing. Then, very slowly the scan of a birth certificate emerged. It was dated from 1983, and

written in clear but legible handwriting.

‘Yes! Mother is Laura Collins... and father is a Gerry O’Reilly of 4 Dorchester Court, Gallway.’

Moss was already at the white board and writing it up. ‘Okay we need everything we can get on a Gerry O’Reilly. We don’t know the circumstances of this, he could be old or young, but we have a name and an address.’

Ninety minutes later, they had managed to track down two Gerry O’Reilly’s who were registered to 4 Dorchester Court.

‘Father and son, both have the same name,’ said Moss.

‘Shit, how do we find out who it was?’

‘Gerry O’Reilly senior was born in 1941, which would make him...’ started Moss.

‘Forty two years old when Jessica was born,’ finished John.

‘You’re quick,’ she grinned. ‘Gerry junior was born the same year as Laura Collins, 1970. He would have been thirteen when Jessica was born.’

‘Shit, either of them could be the father,’ said Erika.

After he had hung up his phone for the last time and destroyed the SIM card, Gerry O'Reilly spent a few hours making preparations for travelling. He'd showered and had a close shave. Then he'd packed a bag, left his flat for the last time and taken the train to Charing Cross, wearing an old pair of army trousers a thick red lumberjack shirt. He'd walked up to Soho, and had bought a fashionable dark skinny suit, a tight white button down shirt and a pair of expensive black shoes. His next stop had been to a high fashion barber in Neal's Yard where he'd paid to have his hair cut and blow dried into a fashionable quiff. He'd then gone to Selfridges and bought an overnight bag, and taken it to a disabled toilet. He emerged a few minutes later in the suit, the new bag packed with his belongings. He'd shoved his old clothes and shoes to the bottom of the bin.

He worked his way down to the ground floor, moving past the make up displays until he found a young slim guy with bright red hair working on the MAC make-up counter, and shown him a picture of the American singer Adam Lambert.

'Can you make me look like him?' asked Gerry, looking the young lad in the eye and deliberately flirting. The lad looked down at the picture and back up at him. He had a small leather apron slung over his slight hips, with

several make-up brushes poking out.

‘Course I can,’ he grinned, returning the flirt and selecting an eyeliner pencil. ‘I like your Irish accent. What brings you so far from home?’

‘This and that. You think you can cover up my bruises, I have a job interview. A film company.’

‘You want to make an impression, do you?’

‘Something like that. Do a good job and I’ll make it worth your while,’ grinned Gerry.

GERRY NOW SAT in a Starbucks at King’s Cross St.Pancras Station. He swilled the last of his coffee down, and then finished the email he was writing. He attached a file, and then activating the camera he grinned, stuck up his middle finger and took a selfie, before attaching it to the email. He then set it to send later that day.

He dumped his take away cup in the small bin in the coffee shop and then left. He crossed the concourse and took the escalator stairs two at a time up to the Eurostar departure gate. His train was due to leave in seven minutes, and it was now or never. With adrenalin coursing through his veins, he placed his bag in the security tray. His £8,000 had been exchanged for a mix of €100 and €500 euro notes which he’d divided between his carry on and his wallet. He handed over his passport to a snotty looking cow, she took it and glanced at the photo, taken a few years previously. He looked rougher, but she didn’t bat an eyelid. She swiped his passport and there was a long horrible moment where she stared at her screen, the passport held open in her tiny hand. The screen beeped and she handed it back with a waxwork smile, wishing him a pleasant trip. The gate was just as easy,

Result, the guy on security looks like a textbook queer, he thought as he approached the end of a short line waiting to go through the metal detectors. He had been sure not to pack anything to rouse suspicion and he’d removed

his belt and anything metal. He breezed through, waiting another minute for his bag to exit the scanner.

‘Have a nice trip,’ grinned the guy on security. Gerry winked, and grabbing his bag he made it onto the train with three minutes to spare. He found his seat just as the train started to move out of the station. Thirty minutes later, the train left the UK and started its journey under the sea, and into mainland Europe.

Back in the incident room, it was now approaching lunchtime. The team had been working through public records, and had discovered that Gerry O'Reilly senior had died just before Christmas of 1982, just over a year before Jessica had been born. This put the young Gerry O'Reilly junior firmly in the frame.

They quickly found a picture and it was blown up and pinned to the whiteboards at the back of the incident room.

'So we're working on the assumption that Marianne and Martin Collins covered up the fact that Laura had given birth to Jessica at just thirteen years old...' Erika was saying to the officers in the incident room. 'This man is Jessica's real father, and could be our prime suspect. Gerry O'Reilly is now forty-four years old. I want to know everything we can find on him. Where is he now, what has he been doing for the past twenty-six years, and what was he doing between 1983 and 1990 when Jessica went missing. Was he aware that he had fathered a child? Laura Collins gave birth in Ireland in the early eighties, in a strict Catholic environment. I'm not saying that Gerry O'Reilly had a motive to kill his own daughter, but this is the most significant lead we've had so far. Also remember that someone out there didn't want us to make this discovery. If we find out everything we can about Gerry, I think

this will lead us to the murderer.’

AN HOUR LATER, Moss came through to Erika’s office with Gerry O’Reilly’s criminal history.

‘You should see this,’ she said handing Erika a print out.

‘First brush with the law was aged 8 in 1980,’ said Erika looking up at Moss as she read,

‘Yeah, nice kid. He was part of a gang of six kids who assaulted an elderly lady and stole her purse, arrest and caution,’ said Moss.

‘Arrested again aged, ten, eleven, and twelve, for shoplifting, arson and stabbing another boy at school in the leg. Aged seventeen he was convicted of ABH, glassed a barmaid during a pub brawl and she lost an eye. He was sent St. Patrick’s Institution in Dublin for eighteen months... Then he seems to have turned his life around, joined the Irish Army in 1991. He was stationed in Kuwait following the Iran-Iraq war, for 2 years, then Eritrea for another year and then as part of a peacekeeping force in Bosnia...’

‘Then he gets into a fight with another officer, nearly kills him, and in 1997 he has a Dishonourable Discharge,’ said Moss. ‘He worked several security jobs over the years, and apart from a caution for marihuana he’s kept his nose clean and stayed off the radar. But he was around during summer 1990, he would have just been released from youth detention...’

‘Pull his passport records. Let’s hope he was in the country when Jessica went missing.’

‘Do we want to bring Laura Collins in for questioning?’

‘No. I want to first go and see her,’ said Erika.

Erika, Moss and Peterson arrived at 7 Avondale Road early afternoon, and the street was eerily quiet. There were no cars, and it was silent, save for the wind, which slowly pushed a whirling pile of leaves towards them.

They walked down the driveway to the house and saw Laura's silver Range Rover parked at the bottom by the front door. The engine was still ticking under the hood and it was still warm when Erika laid her hand on it.

They exchanged a look and rang the doorbell. Laura answered, her hair on end and with a look of wild panic in her eyes.

'Are you here with the paramedics? My mother, she's not responding, she won't wake up!'

They hurried inside and up the wide wooden staircase. The second floor was gloomy, and Laura led the through to the master bedroom at the end of a long carpeted corridor. They passed a guest room, and a room filled with toys and a small bed with a pink eiderdown, which Erika presumed had been Jessica's room.

The master bedroom had fitted wardrobes along one wall, and a dressing table in the bay window that looked out over the garden. A door led off to an en suite bathroom. The double bed was empty, the covers bunched up messily.

‘She’s in here,’ said Laura. They went through to a small elegant bathroom where Marianne was propped up against the bath. She wore a long white nightgown and she was still, her arms flopped open, her face white.

‘Why is she in here? Did she collapse?’ asked Erika.

‘I was trying to get her to wake up... She wouldn’t wake up.’

‘What has she taken?’ asked Erika rushing over with Peterson. She helped him to gently lay Marianne on her back and Peterson opened her mouth to check her airways.

‘She’s not breathing,’ he said. He set to work quickly and began to give her CPR.

‘No, no this can’t be happening,’ cried Laura. ‘Mum! Wake up! Wake up!’

‘I need to know what she’s taken,’ said Erika.

‘She’s had those pills, the sleeping pills...’

‘Halcyon, yes?’

Moss went through to the bedroom and returned with a box of Halcyon. She opened it and pulled out two pills sheets, one was empty and the other had just a couple left.

Laura looked up at her and nodded. Peterson was still working on Marianne, alternating between fifteen chest compressions and two breaths.

‘How many has she taken?’

‘We’ve been giving her a couple every four hours.’

‘We?’

‘I mean, I...’

‘Come on,’ said Peterson. He was working on Marianne and she wasn’t moving.

‘Who has been prescribing these pills?’ asked Erika.

‘The doctor, a private doctor...’ Laura began to cry. ‘Mum, please, I didn’t mean any of it!’

Marianne seems to take in a ragged breath and splutter, colour flushed

back into her cheeks and she began to cough.

‘It’s okay, you’re okay,’ said Peterson. Marianne rolled to one side and was sick. The doorbell went downstairs and Moss left the room. She returned a few minutes later with three paramedics carrying a stretcher.

They spent twenty minutes in the bathroom making Marianne stable.

‘She’s going to be okay,’ said one of the paramedics as they stretched her out.

‘I should go with her,’ said Laura.

‘DI Moss will go, won’t you,’ said Erika. If Moss was disappointed she hid it well.

‘Yes, of course. I’ll go and keep you posted.’

‘We need to talk to you,’ said Erika.

‘I don’t know anything about the pills, I didn’t know they would be bad for her!’

‘No, we want to talk to you about Jessica’s father Gerry O’Reilly.’

Erika and Peterson sat with Laura in the living room of Avondale Road. It was still and silent. A clock ticked out in the hallway and the painting of the Virgin Mary seemed to tilt her head imploringly toward the tableaux below.

Erika had laid the copy of Jessica's birth certificate out on the polished surface of the coffee table in front of Laura.

Laura had been silent for a moment, staring at it in fear and disbelief, and then she had started to retch.

'Laura,' said Erika grabbing her hand, 'It's okay, we're here, and it's going to be okay.'

'No, it's not!' she cried, tears running down her cheeks. 'It's not.'

'Start at the beginning,' said Erika. Peterson handed her a tissue and she took it wiping her face. A calm seemed to descend on her and she began to talk,

'I loved living in Ireland. We had a small house in a pretty village by the sea. We didn't have much, Dad was working on various building sites and Mum was at home with me, but we were happy. I met Gerry when I was thirteen.'

'Where did you meet him?'

'At the local Catholic youth club, a little hut on the hill at the top of the

beach. It may have been filled with pictures of Our Lady, and they assumed that the kids would be playing Ping-Pong and cards, but the older kids would slope off to the beach, amongst the dunes. I was the unlucky girl who fell pregnant.'

'What happened?'

'God, it was so long ago, and Ireland in the early eighties was like England must have been in the sixties. My mother went crazy. I tried to hide it from her, but one night when I stood up in front of the television she saw my silhouette and that was my childhood over...'

'Your mother was more religious than she is now?'

'It's like a fervour in Ireland, competitive Catholicism, like keeping up with the Jones's only it's not washing machines and house extensions that people are investing in. It's the accumulation of deity's, it's time spent at mass. I was sent away to an aunt... she's dead now, but you don't need to check, you can see I had the baby. I had my Jessica...' she broke down again and they waited to give her time to compose herself. 'We moved to England a few months after I came back from my holiday with Aunt Mary. A new start. We came to London with very little, we all lived in a youth hostel near London bridge for two weeks. And we stuck to the story, my mother had given birth a few months previously. Not that anyone cared! You should have seen it. It was a dump, no one said grace before bed, they all took the lord's name in vain, some of the women were shagging around. And you know what was fucked up? My parents were the happiest they'd ever been! They could have let me keep her. It could have been a fresh start for me too.'

'When did you move here?'

'A few years later. My dad got work on the construction of Canary Wharf, they were behind schedule and there was so much work to be done. He'd never earned so much money. We were living in a rented house in East London. I remember the day so clear. He took me to work with him, and we left mum with Jessica, she was almost one. The construction work was all

over the East London Docks, and they'd been drained. The mud was dry and you could climb down the ladder and walk around. Dad was in the pub with some mates in between work, and I got taking to this beautiful lad, he was a gypsy. He was searching amongst all the mud for any metal. I'd started smoking on the sly and I offered him a cigarette and we got talking. Nothing more. Then my dad started yelling at me to come back, he said he'd done a big deal to buy a piece of land. We left to go home to mum and he was so excited, was talking about building a big house for us all. When we got home, my mother had registered Jessica for nursery school, and a doctor and dentist. She'd told them all she was her mother, she'd made it official...'

Erika and Peterson watched patiently.

'This is the land my father bought, and this is the house he built. It all happened so fast. Life changed and I struggled to keep up with it all. Then Mum had Toby, and I was doing my school leaving exams. I used to look at them with Jessica and Toby and I felt the odd one out. My mother thought I was a sinner, that I was a fallen woman. I went away to university and it made me realise that I was living with a religious nutter for a mother. When I came back after my first year in 1990, my mother had started Jessica and Toby studying for their first communion. She was my little girl and I didn't want her to have to go through all that, having to go to confession as a child, learning all about original sin...'

'Did you have much contact with Jessica's father? Gerry O'Reilly?' asked Peterson.

'No. We did what was akin to a midnight flit from Ireland. We left without telling anyone. And this was before Facebook and mobile phones, and we were moving to a new country. We lost contact. Well, I did something I never should have done, and I wrote to Gerry, shortly after I left home for University. I thought he had the right to know...'

Erika's phone rang and she saw it was DS John Mc Gorry.

'Can we stop for just a minute, I need to take this,' said Erika. She left

Peterson with Laura and came out into the garden. The sun was just breaking through the clouds and there was a smell of rotting leaves and wood smoke in the cold air.

‘Boss, where are you?’ asked John.

‘I’m at 7 Avondale Road,’ said Erika.

‘We’ve had a setback, Boss. I’ve just been going through all the records we’ve got on Gerry O’Reilly. During August 1990 he wasn’t released from St Patrick’s Youth detention centre until August 30th 1990, three and a half weeks after Jessica went missing, and he didn’t leave Ireland to come to the UK until October of 1990. He couldn’t have abducted Jessica.’

‘What?’ asked Erika looking back at the house. The windows reflected back the grey sky.

‘But he’s been in the UK over the past few months...’

‘Been?’

‘He left three hours ago on a Eurostar train to Paris.’

‘Shit. Oh, shit. Get in touch with Interpol. Erm, we need to bring him in.’

‘Okay Boss. How are things going with Laura?’

‘Slowly, we’re trying to get her to talk, but I don’t know how much she’s going to divulge.’

Erika hung up the phone and was about to go back inside, when it rang in her hand. It was Isaac Strong.

‘I’ve finally had the results come back on the soil samples we took from the plastic Jessica Collins was wrapped in,’ he said. ‘As well as being soil and silt samples consistent with what would be found at the quarry, there was another type of material which was found within the plastic. When I sent the soil away to the forensic geologist I also included the lower jawbone from Jessica’s remains, where the material was swabbed from between the teeth where it had become lodged.’

‘What’s the material?’ asked Erika becoming impatient.

‘It’s from a type of bivalve mollusc native to the area around the Gower

Peninsula in Wales, also known as the Penclawdd cockle. Jessica was dropped into the quarry wrapped tightly in the plastic, it created a seal that only the water and microscopic organisms could get through...'

'The quarry was searched in the weeks after Jessica went missing, so whoever put her in the water either kept her alive...'

'Or killed her, disposed of the body and then transferred the body to the quarry.'

'Laura was away with her boyfriend Oscar when Jessica disappeared,' said Erika. 'They went to the Gower Peninsula in Wales.'

AUGUST 7TH 1990

THE AIR WAS WARM, and a breeze floated off the sea shore towards Laura and Oscar Browne as they sat beside the fire. It was a cool night, and the sky was a vast canopy of stars above them. They were the only people for miles, sitting on the sand in the small, secluded bay in the Gower Peninsula near Swansea.

‘Do you want some more?’ asked Oscar holding up a bottle of wine. Laura leaned forward and let him top up her mug. She thought how beautiful he was, bathed in the fire light. He stood and stretched and went over to the pile of driftwood he had collected earlier in the day, with the help of Jessica.

When they’d arrived, Jessica had been confused but excited to see the caravan with its view of the bay twinkling in the sunlight. The Gower Peninsular was stunningly beautiful, and this little bay was heaven itself; rolling grass and heather with rocks peeping out, which led down to a vast sandy beach where the sun glittered on the sea in the distance and the wet sand was dotted with rock pools.

LAURA HAD WANTED everything to be perfect, so she sent Jessica and Oscar down to the beach so she could quickly make the Caravan home. She made up the small bed for Jessica at the front of the caravan, under the window where she could see the sea, and at night look up at the stars. She tucked her favourite teddy bear in under the covers. They'd rented the caravan was rented from an advert in the back of a guide book, and being a woman who loved her creature comforts, Laura was pleased to read that the caravan had its own electricity. When they'd arrived with ice cream, and frozen beef burgers they'd discovered that the electricity came from a noisy petrol powered generator, which had taken some of the romance from the air when it roared to life, but outside the caravan it was surprisingly muffled, and from down on the beach you couldn't hear it

When Laura finished making the bed, she'd stood up and brushed her hair from her eyes and peered out of the window. Oscar and Jessica were down on the sand in bare feet, he had an armful of wood and she was poking around in a rock pool. She jumped back with a scream and a giggle, holding a stick, and on the end of it was a large crab... Her long blond hair was loose, and she still wore the party dress. A pang of guilt came over Laura. Clothes were going to be a problem for her, they'd probably have to go into Swansea tomorrow and get her something else to wear, but she was with her daughter for a whole weekend, and she got to be her mother, a role she had been denied and made to feel guilty for so many years.

WHEN JESSICA HAD RETURNED from university, a month previously, the powerful maternal feeling she'd had for Jessica had returned. She longed to spend some time with her daughter during the summer, but Marianne had been harsh. She'd broached the subject one afternoon when everyone else was out, and it was just her and Marianne. She approached her mother in the

laundry room at the back of the house and asked if she could take Jessica out the next day, into London.

‘No! Now you need to get over this,’ Marianne had snapped, pulling clean laundry from the tumble dryer. ‘She’s happy, if anyone is going to take her anywhere, it’s her mother, and in case you’ve forgotten I am her mother!’

‘You are not.’

‘I am! You’re what’s called a *laissez faire* mother,’ Marianne had snarled. ‘You whine and moan about not seeing her, but you’re perfectly happy to take the freedom, going out on the town, spending time with boys... she’s only a few years younger than when you fell, but Jessica is not going to make the stupid mistakes you made. You were nothing better than a common whore, you were still a child! I don’t know what possessed you to open your legs to that boy. I hoped it was a mistake a one-off, but your behaviour over the years shows me there’s an evil in you.’

‘By that you mean that Jessica is a mistake! If I made a mistake then Jessica is that mistake!’

Marianne had turned with real fury in her eyes and slapped her hand around the face. Laura had reeled back and fallen over, hitting her head on the edge of the door to the laundry room. She lay there for a moment in shock and reached up to her head and her fingers. They had come away covered in blood. She looked back at her mother’s. She was unconcerned, and had gone back to unloading the tumble dryer. She was humming, actually humming as she removed the rest of the clothes. She was a heartless bitch.

It was then that Laura had made her plan to take Jessica when she went away camping with Oscar. She’d lied to Marianne that they were leaving on the 6th August, when they were planning to go a day later.

They hadn’t met Oscar. She had given up trying to seek their approval, and telling them about a black lad from a single parent home would have produced exactly the reaction she’d predicted. They would have stopped listening, in particular her mother. It wouldn’t have mattered that he studied

hard, that he was studying to be a lawyer on a scholarship.

With this in mind, she hadn't told Oscar the full story. He presumed her parents knew Jessica was going away with them. He hadn't been hard to convince. He loved children.

BACK ON THE BEACH, Oscar and Laura lay back on the soft dry sand. The fire crackled at their feet and the air was fresh with the smell of the sea and the far off sounds of the sea.

He slung his arm around her neck and his hand started to move over her shoulder and under the neck of her blouse.

'What's that?' said Laura knocking his hand away and sitting up.

'I can't hear anything,' he said. 'Come on, I really want to do you on this beach. There's no one around.'

'Jessica, she's in the caravan,' said Laura pointing to it in the distance. Then they noticed it was in darkness.

'The generator, it's stopped working,' said Laura starting to panic.

'It's probably run out of petrol.'

'But she's scared of the dark, she's all alone there in the dark!' said Laura standing and hunting for her shoes.

'It's okay, she's probably asleep, she was exhausted.'

'We should never have left her alone in there!' Laura shouted.

'It's not my fault, it takes two to tango. Anyway we've got the key,' said Oscar pulling it from his pocket.

'Stop being clever. I want to go back,' said Laura. She now had both shoes on and was marching off up the beach to join the small footpath to the caravan.

When they reached the door, Oscar put the key in the lock.

'That generator really stinks,' said Laura. And then Oscar opened the caravan door.

PRESENT DAY

ERIKA AND PETERSON sat in horror as Laura continued her story,

‘The inside of the caravan was thick with acrid smoke and fumes. One of us had moved the generator, because it was on uneven ground and we didn’t want the wind to blow it over or for it to topple, what we didn’t realise is that we’d moved it up against a vent near the front of the caravan. It was opposite where Jessica slept. We’d locked the doors and the windows. Oscar flung them all open and tried to get the air circulating again, but when I went to her... She wasn’t moving. Her skin was this terrible purple grey colour, and she was dead.’

‘So it was an accident?’ asked Erika in disbelief.

‘We should have checked, I should have checked for things like vents and windows...’

‘What happened next?’ asked Peterson.

‘We both freaked out. I then told Oscar that Jessica was my daughter. He started going on about kidnapping and manslaughter charges and that he had

signed the paperwork to rent the caravan, and he'd signed a legal thing about using the generator. He was a young black man at the start of a glittering law career... Do you know how they treat young black men in the justice system? He kept saying. I carried her down to the beach and I sat up all night with her. Just holding her in my arms. She was so beautiful... then it got light and I heard the car start and Oscar went away and came back, he said he'd been to one of the camping shops a few miles away and that it was all over the news that Jessica had been kidnapped. He freaked out even more, that I'd lied to him.'

'And then what did you do?'

'We buried her... we buried my little girl... we dug a hole and we put her in it. It was under a tree where she could see the sea. We were so scared. Oscar was threatening me. I hadn't slept...'

Erika moved round and took Laura in her arms. She looked over at Peterson and saw that he had tears in his eyes too. Laura managed to compose herself and she pushed Erika away.

'Oscar was just able to switch himself off. We came back and he put it to the back of his mind, but I carried this terrible secret. I was burdened by it and the thought that I had left my little girl... You know what the terrible thing is? I enjoyed keeping it from my mother. That fucking bitch had taken my little girl from me and now she knew what it felt like! They can go to hell!' Laura shouted slamming her hand down on the table. 'I hate her!'

'So how did Jessica go from being buried hundreds of miles away to resting at the bottom of Hayes Quarry?'

'I was going crazy, the police were searching for her, and then they arrested Trevor Marksman and it was sent from heaven. He was a paedophile, I was happy for him to take the blame for Jessica's death... I wrote Gerry a letter.'

'Gerry O'Reilly? Jessica's father?'

Laura nodded. 'I asked him to phone me. We got talking and he said that

he would be in London to see friends before he was posted out to Iraq. I spent the night at his hotel and I told him everything. I thought he'd go crazy, but I had to tell him, he was Jessica's father. You know what he was most interested to hear? That a lawyer was involved, a fancy lawyer... He agreed to help me. I had to bring her home. I saw they had searched the quarry, so a few weeks after I said I was going back to university to get some of my things, as I hadn't returned for the September semester. We went back to Wales, and we dug her up... Oscar hadn't even wrapped her in anything. She was just in the earth. We brought her back.'

'What about the old man who was squatting in the cottage opposite the quarry?'

'I swear I didn't know about that. He saw us, he saw us when we were in the boat. Gerry said he would take care of it and he did. He made it look like he hung himself. He was crazy.'

'But he didn't deserve to die,' said Peterson.

The clock ticked through the silence.

'I used to go there often. It was a comfort to me that she was there. I never told my husband, or any of the friends I made. When you live a lie, it becomes so ingrained you almost think its true. Until you found her again, in my mind, she had gone missing on that afternoon on the way to the birthday party.'

'What about Amanda Baker? What about DI Crawford? They weren't accidents,' said Erika.

'Gerry. It was Gerry... He remembered Oscar and when the time came he cashed in the secret. He got Oscar to represent him when he was charged with attempted murder. Oscar got him off. And then they started this screwed up... association. Gerry would ask for favours, and then Oscar became more and more corrupted by power. He became like his fixer. Doing his dirty work. So when Jessica was found, Oscar had Gerry working for him again. He kept track of what was going on with the case...'

‘And when Amanda Baker got close he made it look like she’d killed herself, and that DI Crawford had slit his wrists, and me?’

Laura looked up at her, her eyes held so much sadness and self-hatred,

‘It was supposed to look like a break in, and the burglar snapped and killed you.’

‘Did they really think they’d get away with it?’

‘They’ve got away with much more in the past,’ said Laura.

‘Do you know where Gerry O’Reilly is headed? He boarded a train to Paris this morning?’ asked Erika.

‘He always said that one day he would make his move, take what’s his, and he would have enough to vanish into a puff of smoke,’ said Laura.

Oscar Browne QC sat at his desk at the Omnia Chambers Legal Firm, looking down over the city. It was growing dark and had started to rain, slapping against the large floor to ceiling windows in sheets.

He picked up his phone and tried to call Gerry O'Reilly for the fifth time. The number went straight to voicemail. He slammed it down and began to pace up and down his office, feeling sweat and dread prickling his back. There was an email alert tone, and he moved back round to his desk. He didn't recognise the email address, but it had the title: A CONCERNED CITIZEN

He opened it and read with horror,

TOP O' THE MORNIN' TO YOU OSCAR,

DOSSIER ON ALL YOUR SCALLYWAG BUSINESS DEALINGS WAS EMAILED TO MET POLICE BIGWIGS A COUPLE OF HOURS AGO.

IF THE BOYS IN BLUE ARE DOING THEIR JOB PROPERLY. YOU SHOULD BE HAVING A VISIT FROM THEM ANYTIME NOW.

YOU OWE ME ANOTHER PAYMENT, BUT LET'S CALL IT SORTED. I DIPPED INTO YOUR PIGGY BANK.

I'LL SIGN OFF BY SAYING, GOOD LUCK, AND YOU'RE A CUNT.

I ALWAYS SAID I'D VANISH IN A PUFF OF SMOKE.

G.

OSCAR BEGAN TO REALLY SWEAT. Then his phone rang. He snatched it up.

'What?'

'Sir, I have your account on the line, says its urgent,' came the voice of his secretary.

'OK,' he said weakly. There was a pause and then the booming voice of Bernard his accountant came on the line.

'What the hell are you doing man? You've transferred out almost two million from your account! We agreed you wouldn't make these decisions without first consulting me! Do you know of the penalties...'

His arm went weak and he dropped the phone back into the cradle. He looked around the office at the main double doors, and the inner office and ensuite bathroom. The buzzer went on his desk, 'Sir,' came the voice of his secretary. 'There are a group of police officers here, they won't... Do you mind, you can't just barge in...'

The double doors burst open and DCI Foster stood with DI Peterson and three uniformed officers. Before anyone could say anything, Oscar moved round his desk, grabbed his wallet, keys and phone and dashed through the door to the right and locked it.

Erika moved to the door and bashed on it with her fist.

‘Open the door Oscar. It’s over. We know everything. We’ve spoken with Laura. She’s now in custody at the station...’ she bashed on the door again. ‘Open the door!’

The secretary rushed in after them.

‘Where does this door lead?’ asked Erika.

‘Um, I...’

‘Answer the question?’

‘There’s a small bathroom, an area for dressing... and it leads out to a small balcony,’ she said.

Erika looked at one of the uniformed officers and gave him the nod. He moved forward and charged the door. It splintered easily and opened. They moved through into a small elegant bathroom, beyond it was a door to a small room with sink and a fridge, a low sofa and double doors. They were open and the rain was pouring inside.

They moved out onto the balcony, and looked down. The rain fell away in sheets down to the road below, dark and lit up with rush hour traffic. They looked up and saw an iron-rung ladder with protective hoops was on the back wall of the balcony, leading up two storeys to the roof. Oscar was halfway up, climbing toward the edge of the rooftop.

The uniformed officers looked up shielding their eyes from the rain, and back to Erika.

‘It’s slick with rain. We need to do a risk assessment, it’s a sixteen storey drop down to the road below,’ said one.

‘A bloody risk assessment?’ shouted Erika above the rain.

‘Health and safety,’ said the other. Erika looked at Peterson and they went for the ladder, she pulled herself up and he followed behind her.

As Peterson and Erika clung to the iron rungs and climbed the ladder, the city of London stretched out below them, a carpet of lights.

‘Shit, he’s almost at the top,’ shouted Erika, trying to quicken her pace, but the soles of her black shoes had very little grip and she had to climb

carefully. There was a crack and a peal of thunder, and a flash lit up the sky.

‘That’s all we need, thunder and lightning when we’re climbing up metal at the top of a skyscraper!’ shouted Peterson.

‘It’s not a skyscraper, it’s an office block,’ shouted Erika down to him.

‘Either way it’s bloody high!’ he shouted back. She looked down at Peterson, he was soaked through. She blinked the water from her eyes and looked up as Oscar made it to the top of the ladder and climbed over onto the roof, vanishing from view.

This spurred Erika on and she reached the top of the ladder moments later and eased herself over the concrete lip of the building.

Oscar was slumped against a fire exit. When he saw Erika he rose to his feet.

‘Oscar. It’s over,’ said Erika. She was joined by Peterson.

‘Come on man,’ said Peterson. ‘Where are you going to go? Just give up and come with us.’

‘You doing the brother act on me?’ asked Oscar. ‘You think cos we’re both black I’m going to give up out of solidarity.’

Oscar moved quickly across the smooth asphalt where the rainwater was gathering in pools like mercury, and went to the edge of the roof. He placed one foot on the raised edge.

‘Stop!’ said Erika.

‘My life is over!’ he shouted. ‘What have I got to look forward to?’

‘You’ve got kids and a wife!’ said Peterson.

‘My kids, my wife,’ said Oscar bowing his head for a moment and wiping his eyes. ‘My kids...’

‘Please, just come with us,’ said Erika.

‘I never meant any of this to happen,’ said Oscar. ‘I know it sounds trite, but I didn’t. Things just got out of hand.’

He looked like he was about to relent and he took his foot down off the edge. He turned to them.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Okay.’

‘Okay, good, just come towards us,’ started Erika. Suddenly Oscar seized the raised edge of the roof and hoisted himself up. He stood with his arms outstretched, leaned forward and threw himself off the edge.

‘Jesus! No!’ cried Erika. They rushed forward and looked down at the road far below. The traffic had stopped, horns were honking, and there was a faint scream. Below, they made out the small broken form of Oscar Browne lying in the road.

EPILOGUE

‘I’m only here because my flat is a crime scene,’ said Erika. Peterson opened the front door to his flat and they went inside.

‘It should warm up in a minute,’ he said, moving to the hall cupboard and turning on the central heating. They had spent several hours in soaking wet clothes, giving statements and a full account of the time leading up to the death of Oscar Browne. Vauxhall Bridge Road had been closed shortly afterwards, and there had been traffic chaos. The national news channels had been asked not to broadcast pictures from the accident without pixellating the body and the surrounding area.

Peterson went to the bathroom and grabbed a couple of towels, throwing one over Erika.

‘These stink of mould,’ said Erika.

‘But their dry!’ he moved to Erika and rubbed at her back vigorously. ‘I’d do it for Moss and any other copper, just keeping you warm,’ he added.

‘Well, it’s not working,’ she grinned.

‘Ah, there we are, can you hear the water in the radiators?’

‘Yes. Do you have any whisky, that works too.’

She through to the living room and Erika peeled off her coat, found two glasses and a bottle of whisky on the counter next to the toaster and poured

two large measures. She drank half of one and then topped it up. Peterson came through a few minutes later wearing a clean dry tracksuit. He chucked one at her, and she went to the bathroom and got changed.

She stared at herself in the mirror. She didn't look as bad as she thought. Exhausted, and pale from hunger, yes, but her face had something she hadn't seen in a long time. She looked hopeful, and perhaps even a little bit happy.

'How can you feel happy after the day you've had?' she asked her reflection. 'What a case! And it all could have been avoided. Accidental death. Would have saved so much heart ache...'

She stripped off her wet clothes and splashed her face with water. There was a clanking crash from outside the bathroom and she heard a yell.

'You all right?' she shouted.

'Yeah, just stubbed my bloody toe!' he shouted. She couldn't help but grin. She pulled on the dry clothes and towelled her hair, then came out of the bathroom.

Peterson was waiting with her whisky, she took it and he held his up to toast.

'What a cluster fuck of a day.'

'Yes, a cluster fuck,' she agreed. They took a long drink. There was a knock at the door, and he went to open it. He came back with Moss who was carrying a large pizza.

'How did you know?' asked Erika who suddenly realised she was starving.

'We have a tradition, well we used to have it more regularly that we order pizza after solving a case.'

'I like that tradition,' said Erika. 'Good work today, both of you,' she added.

Peterson went to the cupboard and pulled down a glass and started to fill it with whisky for Moss.

'Oh, not for me,' she said pulling off her coat.

‘Come on you can have one. And if anyone stops you, your a bloody copper!’ said Peterson.

‘No, I can’t.’

‘You can’t?’ asked Erika. They both looked at Moss.

‘Hang on,’ said Peterson. ‘You’re not the type to turn down a drink.’

‘I wasn’t supposed to say anything, shit, I’m pregnant.’

Peterson and Erika both screamed with delight and bowled into her for a hug.

‘How long, I mean how, when do you have it?’

‘I’ve only just found out that I’m six weeks,’ said Moss.

‘I take it, it was planned?’ said Peterson. ‘Course it was bloody planned, don’t you know anything about lesbian sex!?’

‘Course,’ he said.

‘Yes, I’m sure you watch enough lesbian porn...’

‘Enough!’ grinned Peterson.

‘I think I told you that me and Celia wanted to have one each, and we, well, I just thought it’s now or never so we arranged a donor and we went into it with low expectations and here I am, I’m going to be a Mum.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Erika, hugging her.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I’m excited and terrified, and I’m now eating for two.’

She opened the box and they all grabbed a slice of pizza.

‘You’ve always eaten for two,’ said Peterson. They bit down on their pizza and savoured the taste.

‘So, what’s happening with you two?’ asked Moss through a mouthful of pizza.

‘Oh nothing,’ said Erika.

‘Nope, we’re cool though,’ said Peterson.

‘You just concentrate on eating for three,’ said Erika. Moss got up and went to the sink to grab a glass of water.

Erika looked at Peterson and he gave her a wink, put his arm around her and gave her a kiss. She kissed him back and smiled. She was pleased that she had an excuse to stay the night. She didn't want to be alone.

UNTITLED

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