

NEVER FORGET

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Later I would recognise the smell as blood. Much, much later. At the age of five, I had no idea what it was. The room was dark and I was scared. My sister wasn't moving but her face and clothes felt sticky. I suppose I was panicking, but at that age, with no frame of reference, I wasn't likely to know that.

Although I couldn't see anything, not even my own hand in front of my face, I could hear something. A loud cracking. It was followed by shouting and heavy footsteps, lots of pairs of feet, on the stairs.

Light was now coming from under the door. Shadows appearing within the sliver of brightness meant that someone was outside the room, waiting to come in.

'Nina, Sara, move away from the door.'

I didn't recognise the man's voice and couldn't decide whether his arrival meant good news or bad. I was on the far side of the room already; I couldn't have moved even if I'd wanted to. Another cracking noise and the door swung in, flooding the room with light.

I looked away from the open door, which was filled by the silhouette of a man. I couldn't make out his face but he was huge. Now the room was bright enough to see, I felt compelled to look round. She was my big sister and I couldn't help myself. I knew it wasn't going to be good. But the man was across the room before my eyes reached Sara. He scooped me up and hugged me to him. 'Nina,' he said quietly, 'I'm a policeman. I'm Stan. I've come to take you home.'

He was acting strangely. Few grown-ups had ever picked me up – parents, grandparents, the usual; not strangers. Somehow I didn't mind. I could tell he was there for the right reasons. Never underestimate a child's instinct.

'Guv,' whispered a woman I hadn't noticed before, 'let me take her downstairs.'

'No,' came Stan's abrupt reply. 'I've got her.' He began backing out of the room. It seemed strange at the time but at some point, years later, it became blindingly obvious. He backed out because, if he had turned around, I would have turned around. He wasn't about to risk me seeing my sister's bloodied body lying there on the bare boards.

When I grew up I wanted to be a policewoman. Not to tear around the streets trying to right a wrong that had happened to me and my sister twenty years earlier, not to be a one-woman crusade against the forces of evil, but because, from the moment Stan McGuire had picked me up, I'd been safe. What other profession cared so much? Well, I could have become a doctor, but that took years and I wasn't bright enough. Besides, it wasn't a team of surgeons or nurses who tracked us, kicked the door down, had a 'quiet word' with our abductor, and made sure he went to prison for a very long time.

Chapter 1

20th September

‘Dozens of separate stab wounds and it appears that none of them would have killed her. It’s possible she died because she drowned in her own blood... Come in, Nina. Welcome to Operation Guard.’

I hadn’t even been aware that DCI Nottingham knew my name – but then, as I was the only one who hadn’t made it to the briefing on time, I guessed he’d worked it out. The man wasn’t a detective chief inspector for nothing.

About half an hour earlier, my detective sergeant, Sandra Beckensale, had called me into her office and, with her usual look of disdain, broken the news that I was to go and work with Serious Crime. ‘You’re to get yourself over to Divisional HQ as soon as you can. They want someone who can work long hours for the next couple of weeks and can be spared here. I told them that you’re opinionated, loud, often aggressive, and that quite frankly I’d be glad to be shot of you.’

Cheers, you old hag, I thought to myself. Usually I would say it to her face too, but I wanted to avoid a row and get going. If she’d really said all that, it was a wonder they hadn’t told her to send someone else.

‘I did add, though...’ she paused as if the next words were bile in her throat ‘...that you are a good worker, seem to get on with most people and can be relied upon to deal with anything competently, from mortgage fraud to our favourite shoplifter Joe. So you’re to go, and I’ll see you in a couple of

weeks. Oh, and of course,' she added, rummaging through her handbag for a lighter to accompany the cigarette she was already holding, 'give us a call if you have any welfare issues.'

Not likely. The miserable cow didn't even look up as she said it. I went out into the main office and looked for my friend Laura. I wanted to tell her I wouldn't be around for a couple of weeks, and also to find out how she was fixed if it turned out that they needed any extra help. She wasn't at her desk by the window, so I scribbled her a note, grabbed my stuff and left for Divisional HQ.

On the way I thought about the defrosting dinner in my kitchen sink, the Pilates class I wasn't going to make it to and how I really hated getting to briefings late. It always made the boss focus on you, and that usually meant that a grievous job was more likely to come your way. I also thought about long-time criminal Joe Bring. Before my speedy departure had been arranged, I'd been assigned to interview Joe. He'd been arrested coming out of Tesco Express with three chickens down the front of his joggers. Tesco didn't want their chickens back. That had made me smile. It was the little things in this job that cheered me up. That, and of course walking down the steps of the Crown Court following a jury's guilty verdict. I'd been quite looking forward to asking Joe a few questions under caution. Although he smelt bad – as if he had poultry in his pants – he was actually quite a laugh. He never gave me a difficult time and usually didn't want a solicitor. There wasn't really much point when you'd been caught with food secreted in your underwear.

When I got to the conference room at Divisional HQ, it was already packed. There must have been sixty people there. Some I knew, but most I didn't. I'd never met DCI Nottingham but I had heard of him – it was hard to not hear of people in a force the size of ours. We were a county force, bordering London, but with our own crimes and problems keeping us as busy as the capital.

The room contained a handful of uniform lads and lasses – I knew all of them as they, like me, were local – but there were a lot of older detectives in the room too. As a group, I reckoned that we had over a thousand years’ policing between us. Pretty scary when you put it like that.

As I squeezed my way to a space at the back, I spotted John Wing, another detective from my nick. I was pleased he was here as we got on well. He also had a few years’ more experience than me in CID and had worked on a number of murders. I stood next to him and whispered, ‘Fill me in later, Wingsy?’

‘No worries, Nin.’

The huge white projection screen in the room was showing a map of the area where the body had been discovered.

‘For those who have just come in, this is where our victim, Amanda Bell, was found.’ DCI Nottingham pointed to a large green area on the map and explained that it was the site of an old hospital, recently burnt down, and shortly to be turned into a new housing estate. ‘The body was here, behind some bushes, fairly well hidden, and was found by a member of the public, Graham Redman, who was out walking his dog.’ The DCI pointed to a corner in the northwestern part of the site close to the edge of the green area. ‘Mr Redman has been spoken to by local officers and his statement taken. Absolutely no reason to suspect him of anything at this stage. We haven’t had the post mortem yet, but early indications are that death was some time before Miss Bell was found. I’ll let you know more when I return from the PM.’

‘She was found at 7.45 this morning and patrols were called straight away by our witness at the scene, using his mobile. Nearest patrol was on the dual carriageway the other side of the old hospital site and took three minutes to get there. Crime scene investigators have taken photos and I’ll show you where the body was found and images of Miss Bell’s body in just a minute. Right – Kim, I know that you’ve had an update from Harry Powell, the family liaison officer

who's with the family now. What has Harry passed on to you about Miss Bell?'

The DCI was addressing a woman dressed in a white shirt and crisp black suit, about thirty-five years old, blonde, and unfamiliar to me. She was sitting by the door and sixty or so heads turned to look at her as she spoke, amid a rustle of paper as notebooks were opened and pens poised.

'Well, boss, her full name is Amanda Janine Bell, born 19th July 1978, last known address of 127 Upper Bond Street, Berrybourne. She had no recent boyfriend or partner and has one young son, an eight-year-old boy, Kyle Bell, who lives with his dad. While that's unusual, from what I can glean it all seems to be very amicable, but I'll find out more later from Harry when I speak to him again. Kyle is understandably very distressed. The ex, James or Jim Hamilton, is on hand to identify the body as we haven't been able to locate any other relative nearby – but we're working on it.'

I was distracted by Wingsy passing me a piece of paper. It was a list of names and phone numbers, with DCI Eric Nottingham at the top, then DI Simon Patterson, followed by the details of everyone in the room, except the latecomers like me. I added 'DC Nina Foster', my phone number and 'Borough Staff'. Above my name was that of DS Harry Powell, presumably added by someone other than Harry, since he was elsewhere coping with the grief of an eight-year-old who was never going to see his mum again. Not the job for me. I could cope with the dead just fine, but the grieving were too much for me. Harry and I went back several years, professionally. Sadly for me, he was another happily married man. He'd been my first DS, and a more decent bloke you'd be hard pushed to meet. I hoped that I'd catch up with him at some point during the investigation.

Kim, who I learned from the contact list was Detective Sergeant Kim Cotton, continued with a very brief history of Operation Guard's victim. Amanda Bell had few relatives, a couple of close friends, and had been arrested on four

occasions: once as a teenager for shoplifting, once as an adult for shoplifting, once for drunk and disorderly and the final time, a month ago, for assault. As a result, establishing her identity had been simple. Her most recent arrest had been by PC Ollie Murphy, who had also been the nearby patrol on the dual carriageway that had been called to the body at 7.45am. He had thought he'd recognised her but, because of the blood and the position of the body, he hadn't been certain. He hadn't moved the body or turned it over to identify her, as minimum disturbance at the scene of an obvious death was always the correct procedure; anything else might destroy evidence.

I listened as Kim explained that Amanda was known to have worked as a prostitute in the area and had mainly used the money to buy alcohol. Drugs, unusually, did not seem to be her vice of choice. Despite the four arrests, Amanda's police record consisted only of one caution for shoplifting and a marker for being on police bail for the assault. It wasn't much of a criminal record in the scheme of things. We did however have her DNA, photograph and fingerprints.

'Thanks, Kim,' said Eric Nottingham when Kim finished reporting Harry Powell's insight so far into Amanda Bell's life. 'Harry is, of course, getting the ex-partner's movements to rule him in or out.' He said the last to Kim, receiving an efficient nod in return, before continuing, 'Here are the photos from the hospital site, or scene one as it now is.'

The area had a bank of trees running along its perimeter, separating it from the dual carriageway on one side and school playing fields on the other. Amanda had been found several metres from the trees, hidden among low bushes and shrubs. Without passing by close to the body, it would have been unlikely for anyone to stumble across her lonely grave. The photos taken from the most obvious approach path showed her lying among the thorns. If she had been alive when thrown into the scrub, I could imagine her wondering if there was anywhere lonelier on earth. What an awful way to go.

Next, Amanda's face filled the screen. The crime scene investigator had taken a close-up of the head and shoulders. Her expression wasn't scared, at peace or terrified. She just looked dead. As the photos scanned out from the facial close-up they showed the broken, dumped body of a prematurely middle-aged woman, dressed in a dirty, tattered skirt which was raised slightly, caught on the low-lying branches. The thin, thorny extensions held berries coloured bright red, in stark contrast to Amanda's exposed flesh, her white legs, streaked dark with a mixture of dried, smeared blood and mud.

She was lying on her left side but with her right leg extended, as if to stop her toppling forward on to her face. Her left arm was out in front of her and her right hand tucked underneath her. It was as if she'd been reaching for something, with maximum effort, but then it had all become too much.

My thoughts were interrupted by Nottingham's voice as he said, 'The dark marks you can see here on her legs are stab wounds. They cover her body. It's difficult to see from the way Miss Bell is lying, but her navy blue top is open at the back. It would appear it's been cut with a knife as there's a single, clean slit. The CSI had difficulty taking photos from behind the body, as you can see, because of this very dense and spiky scrubland.'

By the time he'd finished talking us through the evidence, Nottingham looked energised, well up for the task. Solving murders had that effect. 'We have loads to do. I've declared this a Category A murder, and that means pulling out all the stops. Right now we believe we're dealing with a stranger murder, a body in a public place, which may either be the kill site or the dump site. However, I'm not ruling anything out at the moment. There is no obvious motive and we're talking multiple injuries so the press are bound to pick up on that soon; the media release from our press office is being put together. I'll leave Kim to assign roles and tasks to you all.

I've kept it short, as time is getting on and I want you out on the ground. We'll have another briefing in here at six. Either be here or call Kim with your updates and reasons why you won't be. Someone take the contact sheet and make copies for everyone, so we can keep in touch with you all. Thanks, everyone. It'll be a late one.'

We began filing out of the room towards fresher air, some people pausing to talk to those in charge, check details and submit paperwork.

'Wingsy, long time no see. How've you been?' I asked as I leant over to give him a kiss on the cheek.

'I'm good. Great to see you, Nin. How did you manage to get on this enquiry?'

'Right place, right time, I suppose. I was just off to interview Joe Bring when my DS told me to get to Divisional HQ to help out.'

'The great farmyard thief of the county. Nice one. See if we can work together, shall we? You can tell me all about that Portuguese bloke you were seeing.'

'He was Russian and also married. Oh, yeah, and a total wanker to boot.'

'You do pick 'em, Nin. Come on, let's have a word with Kim and see what she's got for us.'

Photocopying the contact list was my first job. I made seventy copies just in case, while Wingsy continued to wind me up. 'Well done, Detective Foster. Your first job in the murder investigation team and you appear not to have cocked it up. If only your love life was so easily solved.'

'Or this murder, you jug-eared halfwit.'