

2020

MONDAY, 20 JANUARY

Text from Yvonne Gilchrist to Lyra Makris, 9.02 am

*Hey L, I tried to call you but it went straight to vm. Just wanted to make sure everything is okay because you weren't at brekky. No big deal, we can reschedule. Speak soon xx*

Text from Yvonne Gilchrist to Lyra Makris, 1.17 pm

*Heya. Where are you? I'm getting worried. Let me know you're okay x*

Voice message from Lyra's mother 6.56 pm

*Lyra, honey? Are you all right? I got a text from your friend at work saying you're not there. Are you sick? I can pop over later and bring some food if you like. Call me when you get this. Love Mum*

Text from Yvonne Gilchrist to James Delway, 7.34 pm

*Hi James, it's Yvonne. Long time no speak. Hope ur good. I know this is weird but I'm trying to get on to Lyra and I just want to check she's not with you? Long shot I know but I'm getting worried.*

Reply from James Delway to Yvonne Gilchrist, 10.05 pm

*Hey Vonnie. All good with me. Sorry I haven't seen her since my xmas party at the bar. Maybe she lost her phone, she's pretty good at doing that. be good to catch up sometime x*

# CHAPTER ONE

TUESDAY, 21 JANUARY, 5.48 AM

The photo is sent via a bogus Instagram profile while the city sleeps, save for some enthusiastic joggers, exhausted shiftworkers, and early-bird media types fuelled by caffeine and the slim possibility that today might be the day they catch the worm. The message lands in the Instagram inbox of Melbourne's largest newspaper, *Melbourne Today*, where it sits unread for over ninety minutes.

Brian Pocock arrives at the office, hungover and ruffled, having stayed at his mate's house after an unexpectedly long session at a Fitzroy pub the previous evening. Brian didn't wake early enough to go home and get either his literal or figurative shit sorted, and now he perches at his desk with remnants of beer and the coffee he just drank churning ominously in his stomach.

Swallowing down the threat of vomit, he scans the subject lines of the emails that landed in the 'hot tips' inbox overnight. His bleary eyes catch on the occasional word or phrase. *Suspicious. Probably nothing. My neighbour. Promised I wouldn't say anything.*

Brian lifts his hands high above his head, attempting to stretch the god-awful feeling out of his body.

‘Good morning.’ The new cadet sashays past, her eyes glowing with amusement.

‘Hi,’ Brian mumbles, a beat too late.

She and her hips disappear into the kitchen, and Brian drags his eyes back to the screen. He reads an email about a dangerous dog that Jan from Melton believes is a threat to society and another about a neighbour who might be growing ‘illegal smoking plants’. He checks the *Melbourne Today* Instagram profile, pleased to see the followers have gone up by over one hundred since yesterday. Then his eyes lock on a message from an account called ‘Click\_Click’ with three followers. The preview of the message shows the first three words: *Photo of #2*.

Brian yawns, laces his fingers together and cracks his knuckles. ‘Here we go.’ Before he took this job, he was vaguely aware there were a lot of nutty people in the world, but he didn’t realise how much weird shit actually happened or how many people were hell-bent on sharing it with the media.

Rubbing his eyes, he opens the message.

*Good morning. Please find attached a photo of victim #2 just after her death at 9.40 pm yesterday. Regards, The Photographer.*

Brian huffs out a nervous laugh. He shouldn’t open the attachment; he should wait until his boss gets in. It could be a virus or a scam, like the ones the IT team are always warning everyone about.

He glances at his watch. His colleagues are starting to trickle in, but his boss won’t arrive for at least an hour, and what if he makes a big fuss and it turns out to be some dickhead sending a nude?

Fuck it. Brian wants to know what this weirdo is on about. He squares his shoulders and summons bravado; nevertheless, he experiences a sharp flare of apprehension as he opens the attachment.

It's a close-up of a young woman's face. Strands of long dark hair. Vacant, made-up eyes and puffy, mottled skin, wet with tears. An ugly gash at her throat, so deep it almost separates her head from her décolletage. Blood.

In his peripheral vision, Brian registers that the cadet and her hips are on their way back from the kitchen. He glances at her, desperately hoping that when he looks back at his screen the awful image will be gone. But it's still there—and somehow, it's even more obscene than before. Vomit surges in his throat, and this time there's no stopping it.

## CHAPTER TWO

TUESDAY, 21 JANUARY, 8.03 AM

The muted blare of the buzzer echoes above them for the second time. Detective Constable Penelope Kibbs double-checks the address and presses the buzzer again. Still no answer. She shrugs and looks at her partner, Detective Inspector Mike Barnes.

‘Try the other apartments,’ he suggests. ‘See if we can find someone who will let us in.’

Pen nods. She likes working with Barnes. He has confidence without ego, not like some of the other male detectives, who make every shift feel like a test. Barnes actively shies away from drama, a trait that Pen particularly appreciates at times like this. She’s had a bad feeling ever since she spoke to the missing girl’s mother earlier this morning.

Barnes ambles off to answer his mobile, and Pen tries the other buzzers, starting at number one. Most of the occupants aren’t home, but a reedy voice comes through the speaker after she rings the buzzer for number six. Pen explains who she is and holds her badge

up to the scratched camera lens. She's rewarded with the click of the door opening and gestures at Barnes, who ends his call and strides over to her.

'Boss wants us back asap,' he says, looking energised. 'Wants us to follow up a lead on Douglas Jackson.'

Pen scowls. 'Do you have any details?'

'Frost wasn't specific. Just said he'd brief us when we get back.'

Rusty Frost is their new supervisor, and so far she likes him a lot more than Superintendent Clive Sanders, whom she reported to for the past two years. Frost is a workaholic and has incredibly high standards, but like Barnes, he seems to have a handle on his ego. He always makes a point to not only seek out her opinions but also take them seriously. And he's kind. He was especially supportive when Barnes's sister was killed at the beginning of last year.

But Pen has noticed that Frost has been short-tempered over the past few days, and she can tell he's desperate for a break in the Mackenzie Jackson case. The Camberwell mother left her house after an argument with her husband ten days ago and is widely presumed dead. The case has consumed Pen and Barnes for nine days, and it's Frost's first major case since his promotion to superintendent, so the pressure is on.

Frost isn't married and doesn't have children. Everyone knows he was in a long-term relationship with a journalist, Olive Groves, several years ago. She broke his heart. Late last year, Pen sensed there was still a spark between them when Groves turned up at a crime scene and started asking Frost questions, but he quickly became dismissive toward her, probably wanting to ensure he remains above reproach, considering his new title. Regardless of how Frost feels about Groves, Pen figures Groves regrets dumping him back in the day—he's a total catch. Not that Groves isn't, of course.

All Pen says to Barnes is, ‘Hopefully we won’t be here too long.’

Apartment eight is on the second floor. There’s no lift, so they make their way up the narrow staircase to the door.

Barnes stands to the side, and Pen raps her knuckles against the smooth grey surface. ‘Lyra? Lyra Makris? Are you in there? It’s the police.’

No sound comes from the apartment. Pen exchanges a glance with Barnes and recalls the smiling face of the missing girl from the photo her mother gave them.

‘Could be a medical emergency?’ Barnes offers. ‘She might have slipped in the shower.’

‘Maybe she met someone,’ Pen says, although from the conversation she had with Lyra’s mother, this seems unlikely.

Lyra broke up with her long-term boyfriend just over a month ago, and it sounds like she’s been apprehensive about throwing herself back into the dating scene. Her ex, James Delway, an arrogant bolshy type who runs a bar in Flemington, claims he hasn’t spoken to her since she turned up uninvited to his work Christmas party in mid-December. Delway alleges he politely but firmly informed Lyra there was no chance of a reunion. Reading between the lines, Pen suspects that he enjoyed conveying this sentiment to her in front of his colleagues. Regardless of how it played out, Lyra’s mother believes her daughter has been very upset.

Barnes says the unthinkable but statistically possible. ‘Suicide?’

*God, please not that,* thinks Pen. ‘Maybe she’s just sick. Or she’s gone away somewhere last minute.’

Barnes’s voice remains even. ‘We need to get inside. I’ll call the body corporate—the number’s on the letterboxes downstairs.’

After knocking one more time, Pen checks her phone while she waits, trying to ignore the fluttery feeling in her chest. It’s been

a rough few months. A tough year. In March she attended the scene of a tragic murder-suicide of a toddler and his drug-addicted mother, then in July she was assigned the case of a drunk teenager who had accidentally killed his mother when he pushed her during a heated argument, causing her to hit her head against her newly installed designer kitchen bench.

And then on Christmas Eve, there was the backpacker murder. Marta Holm, a young Swedish woman, was stabbed several times, her body left under a tree in the Treasury Gardens for a drunk couple to stumble upon the following morning. Under her body was a Polaroid photo of her wearing the same outfit she'd been killed in, smiling and posing with a glass of champagne in her hand. Someone had written *#1* beneath the photo, and a handwriting expert dismissed the possibility it was written by Marta. Speculation has been rife within the case team that the picture and number are a warning, an evil taunt, but so far there are no further clues to lend credence to this theory—and, thankfully, no similar murders. The DNA and prints found on Marta's body and at the scene haven't produced a match. To date the Polaroid detail has been contained to the case team but that hasn't stopped a general sense of unease settling over the entire force.

Since these events, gruesome images have hijacked Pen's thoughts at random moments, disrupting mundane tasks. Often her first thought on waking is Marta Holm's pretty smile from the Polaroid morphing into the horrible expression on her lifeless face in the postmortem photos. Pen is finding it increasingly difficult to banish gory scenes from her mind, and her faith in humanity is waning. None of the cognitive behavioural techniques her counsellor has suggested are working, and she's questioning her relentless pursuit

of a detective role. Maybe she needs a holiday—or a career change. Her anxiety is taking on a life of its own.

Barnes returns up the stairs. ‘The property manager will be here in thirty minutes.’

Pen tries to quell her racing heart as they lean against the banister, making small talk. Barnes tells her anecdotes about his teenage kids. He doesn’t mention his recent separation, which Pen only knows about because Frost asked her if she thought Barnes was okay in the wake of his relationship breakdown. Pen had been a little stung that her colleague hadn’t confided in her, but she understood he might want to keep his personal life separate to his work. She doesn’t like to discuss her personal life either—not that there’s much to discuss. The only relationship she’s been in lately is with her slobbery bulldog, Elliot.

Barnes is recounting a story about being mistaken for a popular reality star while on a holiday in the United Kingdom, when the property manager arrives. A slight woman in a boxy cream suit, with frizzy brown hair, excess jewellery and palpable nervous energy, she studies their identification. With a sharp nod, she jerks a bejewelled finger toward the lock, the keys in her hand jangling. ‘I’ll just open the door for you then?’

‘Yes, please,’ Pen says. ‘Thank you.’ Despite the apprehension she feels about what they might find, it’s a relief to be moving. The stagnant air in the stairwell is warm and cloying.

‘If you can just wait here,’ Barnes instructs the woman, as they enter the apartment. Once they are inside, he closes and locks the door behind them.

The lounge room is neat and odourless. Nothing seems out of place in the adjoining galley kitchen either. Pen registers dried flowers in a vase, a trio of vitamin bottles on the bench and two

wedding invites anchored by magnets on the fridge. There's a weekly planner on the bench that she reads aloud from: 'Ned's party Saturday night, kickboxing on Sunday night, breakfast with Yvonne on Monday morning. Pilates this morning.' The bad feeling is back, an uncomfortable fizzing in her stomach. She clears her throat and points beyond the kitchen. 'How about you check through there? I'll go this way.'

In Lyra's bedroom, forest-green sheets are pulled tight across the mattress, the pillows fluffed and propped neatly at the bedhead. Near the window, a round mirror hangs above a small wooden desk that doubles as a dresser. Pen stares at her own worried-looking face, noticing that the humidity has curled the ends of her brown shoulder-length bob.

The dresser boasts an impressive collection of make-up as well as a MacBook Air, a keyboard, a large screen, and a ring lamp with a smartphone holder attachment. A retro hatstand in the corner is heavy with colourful scarves, coats and bags. Dozens of photos jostle for position on a pinboard, and Pen recognises Lyra's smiling face in several shots. Her father is Greek, her mother Irish, and her features showcase a glorious mix of these lineages. She's perfected a flattering pose: in most of the photos she stares directly into the lens as if challenging the photographer to take a bad shot.

'A storage cupboard and the smallest laundry I've ever seen,' Barnes calls out. 'Both clear.' His voice fades. 'Hang on, there's another room.'

Pen checks the cupboards and under the bed.

'Spare room is clear,' he calls again. 'You have anything?'

'Bedroom's clear, just checking the bathroom.' She shuts her eyes briefly, inhaling as she nudges open the door.

A dark green towel hangs on a metal hook. On the vanity a pink toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste sit in a square perspex container that could do with a wash. A puddle of lilac wax fills a shallow china plate on the floor, the black wick drowned in the centre. Mirrored cabinets reflect Pen's solemn face. Behind the navy shower curtain, a tap drips.

Aware of Barnes in the bedroom behind her, aware of her heart beating wildly, aware that her day might be about to go to absolute shit, she draws another deep breath and tugs the cheap plastic to the right.

The hooks rattle against the metal rod. There's nothing in there.

Just as her phone rings, Barnes enters the room with a flushed face. 'All clear?'

Her insides are still tight with latent dread, but she nods at him, answering the call with a crisp, 'Kibbs.'

'I need you and Barnes back here.' Frost's voice is strained. 'We think your missing woman has been murdered.'