

# Caterpillar Days

By

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## Chapter 1

Present-day - Hackney, East London

No one was on the street, and with the weather, who could blame them? The street lamps hadn't turned on, but the combined illumination of the setting sun and the rising moon did nothing to dispel the gloom of Carrie's mood.

She jogged between the shop awnings, playing hide and seek with the sheets of rain. She had coaxed her blond bob under the waterlogged baseball cap. The leather jacket was definitely a mistake. What the hell was she doing here? Fat gobbets of water splattered and danced on the pavement, drenching her feet, and her jeans clung to her legs.

As a chill wind blew into her face, a shiver went through her whole body, and she took shelter in a shop doorway. Almost nine, a few minutes until her meeting. She fished her mobile from her pocket, almost dropping it as her hands were so cold. She glanced up and down the street. Still no one. Carrie dialled a number from memory. Stamping her feet to dispel the cold only squished the warm water from her socks. She waited for her call to go through.

"Allo?"

"Is that you, Jessie?" asked Carrie.

"Course, who else? Is it done?"

"If it was, you shouldn't be answering your phone without waiting for the ring code."

"Oh yeah, sorry I forgot," said Jessie, "I'll 'member next time."

"We spoke about this? It's dangerous. If they twig anything, Rats will be on your case and mine. Rats don't fuck around. I want us all to walk away from this and you to have a life away from the Smoke."

"Yeah, I want that too, Carrie. But if Darren hears you calling him Rats, it'll be your arse in a sling."

"OK, Jessie, remember I'll ring three times and cut off; I'll do the same again, and when I ring the third time, you pick up. Remember. Even if it's my number, unless I do the code ring, don't answer."

"Yeah, I understand. Take it easy. You're a good person, Carrie; from the first time we met, I knowed it."

Carrie ended the call, and with a sense of foreboding, continued towards her meeting with Darren, the Rat.

She slowed as she approached the alley, which ran down the side of the fish and chip shop. Passing the entrance, she casually glanced down to the next street. Save for piles of rubbish and the ubiquitous cardboard boxes; the alley was clear to the streetlight shining at the far end. The side door of the chip shop was open, and the faint light from the kitchen shaved the darkness a little.

She rocked back and forth on her feet, looking into a women's boutique. In reality, she looked for anyone paying her attention in the reflection of the glass. At least the rain had eased. Satisfied, she retraced her steps and turned into the alley.

A figure approached from the opposite end. As she stepped over puddles and dogshit, she passed the open side door of the chip shop and caught the orgasmic waft of hot chips and vinegar. Right now she would love to be tucking into a chip butty and a mug of tea. Heaven.

The darkness grew deeper, and there was no escape from the drizzling rain. Carrie couldn't rid herself of the feeling the meeting wouldn't go to plan. Mainly because Darren planned it, and for all his possible hidden strengths, Darren wasn't a planner. He was more of a 'by the seat of his pants kinda guy'. Whatever that meant?

As the figure came closer, she called out, "Is that you, Darren?"

"Yeah, let's get outta the rain." Darren strode a little further and ducked into a doorway.

Carrie inched towards the door. It opened into a lit small rubbish storage area for another shop. It smelt like rotten vegetables and piss. Standing, leaning against one of the large metal bins, was Darren. Early thirties, greasy, mousey hair pulled back in a ponytail to reveal a rat-like face, an impression not helped by one protruding upper front tooth where two had been. He was skeletal thin. His designer Barbour jacket and jeans hung on him like they hung from a hook, not a human frame. But he wore his trademark white £500 trainers, which now looked like soggy market knockoffs.

"Looking good, Carrie." His eyes gave her the once over; it didn't take a psychology degree to know what he was thinking. "Did you bring it?" he asked.

Carrie looked around and glanced over her shoulder into the alley. A bead of sweat ran down her back. She needed to portray confidence. Darren was street through and through, like a hyena he would sense fear. A quick peek into the alley again and all business now, she turned to face Darren.

She said, "Did you?"

Darren nodded and tapped the bin he was leaning against.

"Let me see it."

Darren shook his head. "Nah, that's not how this works. You show me yours, then I'll show you mine."

The times Carrie had met Darren, he was always bobbing or bouncing, but tonight he was actually twitching. He was on something. Great. Darren, stone-cold sober, was a fuck-up, but twitchy Darren, hyped up on some shit, propelled the likelihood of this going according to plan to whatever the direct opposite of that was.

Carrie said, "Mine is nearby; I'll get it. Just wanted to make sure the meet was OK."

"Fuck that, Carrie!" he seethed.

He had something in his right hand—a gun. It looked like a 22 automatic. Probably. It looked old, but if it didn't blow up in Darren's face if he pulled the trigger, she could get hurt. Big time.

"That wasn't the deal!" Darren screamed. "You bring me the money, we make the exchange, and we're both happy. Now I'm not happy. Where's the fucking money?"

"What the fuck, Darren? Why the shooter? We're not in Chicago."

"For my protection and to make sure things go my way. Where's the money?"

Darren twitched so much he was almost twerking. This deal was going to rat-shit fast.

"OK, OK, calm down. We're all friends here. I've stashed the money close by, two minutes tops, and we can do the deal." She used both her hands in a calming gesture. "We can both walk away, and both win. Don't fuck this up."

Darren levered himself off the bin and moved towards her.

"Darren, for fuck's sake. You know me. I'm not a threat to you. Stop waving that thing around. You're making me nervous."

Darren was up in her face now, raging.

"But I don't know you, not really. You could be trying to rip me off."

A new version of Darren appeared. A hungry Darren, a quick trip away from loony toon Darren.

Carrie faked a smile. "If that were the case, I would be holding the gun, not you."

Darren appeared to take note of that and took a step back. Then, with a leer on his face and eyes fixed on her crotch, he moved towards her and said, "You're right. Maybe I should make sure you're not carrying."

Carrie shoved him back a few paces. "Get out of my face!"

Darren came right back at her, holding her by either side of her jacket. He had finally lost it.

In the same instant, faint blue light trickled into the storage area, accompanied by shouts and running feet.

Darren screamed, "Fucking move, bitch!" Like a squirrel caught in headlights or, in this case, flashing blue lights, he turned feral before her eyes.

Fixated only on escape, he pushed Carrie back and twisted her out of his way, still holding the gun in his right hand. A deafening explosion within the small storage area echoed off the metal bins and reverberated into the alley. The running feet stopped for a second, and Darren ran out of the doorway and back the way he came. Carrie fell into the alley, landing on her back, looking up at the sky, hyperventilating air and rain in equal measure before the darkness took her.

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She woke with a start. It took time to realise she hadn't been running 'round the swing park. The same old nightmare.

Opening one eye, she realised it didn't give her enough perspective, so she slowly opened the other. Wow, her head was banging. Everything ached. Gingerly, turning her head to the right, she saw tubes going into both arms hooked up to drips and tubes coming out of her chest, going below the bed, probably a drain. OK, hospital. So, not dead then.

Turning her head to the left, a young, uniformed police constable sat on a chair reading a book. She tried to speak, but her mouth seemed full of cat litter. She coughed.

The constable looked up from his book.

She mouthed, "Water."

The constable stood and poured a little water into a plastic beaker. He tried to hold it to her mouth, but spilled most of it onto her chest.

Enough went in for her to croak, "What time is it? What day?"

The constable checked his watch and said, "Five-thirty in the afternoon, Friday. You've been here for two days."

"What happened?"

The constable looked over his shoulder to the open door. "Maybe I better get the Inspector. I'm meant to call him when you wake up."

"Ok, but first tell me what happened," she rasped.

The constable looked at her. "From what I understand, you got shot in the chest. It was all a bit dodgy when they first brought you in."

An overweight man in his late forties wearing a grey suit that looked like he had been sleeping in it entered the room as the constable was talking.

"That's enough, constable. Go grab a drink, and on your way back, I'll have a white coffee, two sugars and some digestives."

The constable turned. "Yes, sir, sorry, sir."

As the constable left the room, Detective Inspector Bob Fisher said, "Well, Christine, that was a right royal cluster fuck, wasn't it? How are you feeling?"

Christine breathed, "Like hammered shit, if I'm honest. Could I have a little more water?"

Bob Fisher poured water into the plastic beaker and held it to her lips. This time, more of it found its way into her mouth and down her parched throat.

"Thanks, what happened?"

Bob Fisher lowered himself with some difficulty into the chair recently vacated by the constable.

"There'll be a formal debrief when you're up and about, but basically, Darren the Rat brought a gun to the party and freaked out when you told him you didn't have the money. The team heard you mention a shooter and then confirm a gun and went into protect our asset mode."

Christine grimaced in pain as she tried to sit further up in the bed, but waved away Bob Fisher's movement to assist. "Yeah, remind me again, who was the asset? 'Cos, I got shot."

"Well, according to Darren, he had hold of you. He saw the blue lights and heard the cavalry running down the alley. As he pushed you out of the way to escape into the alley, he accidentally pulled the trigger. We found him standing at a crowded bus stop two streets away with his hands up."

Christine smiled with gritted teeth, "He must have thought, having shot a member of London's finest, something dire would have happened to him in a dark, secluded place."

Bob Fisher shook his head and said, "The things criminals believe! But he hadn't put it together at that stage."

Christine asked, "But he has now?"

"Well, yes, and he had help from the Met's media team."

"What does that mean?"

"The initial info we had was you died on scene. The paramedics gave you cardiac massage. Part of your recovery is going to be mending the ribs they broke. Somebody told the media team you had no relatives to inform, and they released your picture. During the media frenzy in the immediate aftermath of the operation, it came out the officer was Detective Sergeant Christine Woolfe, and you were working undercover for Specialist Crime and Operations."

"For fuck's sake, Bob. So, my face is all over the media. Fantastic. No more undercover work for me."

They sat in silence until Christine finally uttered, "I thought it was a 22. Surely, it didn't get through the vest?"

"No, by a fluke; when he pulled the trigger, the end of the barrel had worked its way under your left armpit. The back of the vest caught the bullet after it collapsed your lung."

She shook her head in disbelief. "As you said, Bob, a cluster fuck. So, I guess while I'm lying here contemplating my navel, I should apply for a new job?"

"Wow, most coppers would be worried about getting shot and dying, the collapsed lung, the broken ribs, maybe collecting an ill-health pension, but Christine is worrying about getting back to the job."

"You know me, Bob. I'll worry about all that stuff when I need to."

"Yes, I do. You're a very scary woman, Christine. If you don't mind me mentioning it, you need to get a life. Don't worry, we'll find you a home. When you've recovered. You were very lucky, you know. We wouldn't be having this conversation at all if he'd had a nine mill."

"I don't feel very lucky right now." She winced again as jolts of pain radiated around her chest. "Just tell me we got the half kilo of coke?"

"Nope, it was a scam for money all along. Darren cooked it up with his cousin Jamie, an informant for the drug squad. The plan was to rip you off for the money and sell you some cut crap, then sell you out to the drug squad as a quantity dealer. Win, Win. Of course, we didn't know about the family connection beforehand. Darren and Jamie will have a secure address for a few years."

Christine looked away to a corner of the room. "What about Jessie? Did you speak to her?"

Bob Fisher shook his head. "She's vanished. Jamie called her for a meet after the Op went south. I've interviewed him about her involvement and whereabouts. But no."

"Bob, we should have protected her. Taken her off the street. I told her not to answer the phone."

Bob Fisher held Christine's wrist, avoiding the cannula. "You can't save everyone, Christine. You know that. Some people just get themselves involved in shit."

"But we let her down big time."

"It was my decision. I'll take the rap if there is any."

"It's not about taking the rap, Bob."

"I know. Look, I can see you're exhausted. I'll swing by tomorrow. The doctors say you'll be here for a week or two."

"Thanks for the update, Bob. On your way out, tell the nurse I need more painkillers."

"Will do. See you tomorrow."

He struggled out of the chair and walked out the door.

With effort, she moved further up the bed and reached for her mobile. The battery was running low. She had missed no calls, and the only messages she had received were from her colleagues, now former colleagues, wishing her a speedy recovery. Fucking media arseholes! She was going to miss that job.

A short while later, the young constable returned from the cafe. "Has the inspector gone?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Good," the constable said, "He's been kipping in the relatives' room and 'spelling' me and the other officers here for the last day and a half. Do you want the coffee and biscuits?"

"Nah, you have it. I had something plentiful and opioid from the nurse."

Christine snuggled down in the bed, which the painkillers made less painful, and closed her eyes.

"S'later," she said.

## Chapter 2

Christine discharged herself from the hospital after two and a half weeks. Bob Fisher offered her a stint at one of the police rehabilitation places scattered around the country. She declined. She wanted to look for a new job.

A couple of years before Christine's mother died, her mother had bought a new-build flat in Balham, South London. Christine moved in a few months after the funeral. Her mother had not bothered to make a will. As the only surviving next of kin, everything her mother left came to her. It included a shockingly large credit card debt, a bank loan, and an existing mortgage on the flat. She paid off the debt with most of her savings and applied for a new mortgage. The process had not been easy as she hadn't been in the police long and didn't have the required amount of monthly wage slips. But, once the rules of intestacy kicked in, her mother's equity in the flat became hers, which swung it as far as the mortgage company was concerned.

The flat was on the second floor of a four-storey, purpose-built block. It had one bedroom, a kitchen-diner-lounge, there wasn't enough space for three separate rooms, and a combined shower room and toilet. The main window looked out onto another similar block. Still, it had an allocated parking space outside the main entrance door. As rare as rocking horse shit in London. It was also within walking distance of Balham tube and a quick journey to Scotland Yard, where she was based. Or where she used to be based.

Bob Fisher called her a week after she came home from the hospital for the debrief. It had gone as she expected, with everyone trying to distance themselves from the fuck-up. The drug squad claimed no way they could have known Darren was a cousin of Jamie, their informant. The protection team claimed they responded rapidly but didn't want to mess up the op by acting too hastily. Basically, Christine thought,

everyone was upstairs collecting fares when all the action was happening downstairs.

Drug squad officers questioned Jamie again about Jessie's whereabouts. He claimed she had not turned up for the meet after he had contacted her. No one believed him, but not believing is not evidence. You learn that fast in the police. Jessie may have skipped London and was living a good life, but no one believed that either.

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Christine sat in her living room, looking at the bare walls and her 40-inch HD TV, standing on two unopened packing boxes left over from her move. She kept her mum's double bed and the sofa and took everything else to charity shops or the dump. She'd been there ten years and hadn't put up a picture. But it suited her. She could do whatever she wanted, bring anyone back here - although not much of that had happened over the years. Unsociable hours and often working away from London, as she had done a lot during her undercover days, were not conducive to lasting relationships. In any case, lasting relationships were not her thing. Her longest lasted three months. Andrew, a bank cashier at the local branch of NatWest, had told her he could not get through to her. Told her she shut her emotions off like a switch. Told her she needed help. She told him to sling his hook.

Christine picked up her mobile and keyed in Bob Fisher's number. He answered after it rang twice.

"Christine, everything alright?"

"Yeah, A-OK here. Watching daytime TV and contemplating whether to poke sharp sticks into my eyes. Any news on the job front?"

There was a long silence at the other end of the call. "Christine, are you sure you want to come back so soon?"

"Yes, Bob. I need to get back on the horse. Be useful. Catch bad guys."

"Ok, the crime squad local to you at Tooting is looking for a DS, and I've got you the gig if you want it. You can start Monday week."

"I'll take it. Can't I start this coming Monday? I'm starting to hum along with the Good Morning show music."

"No, Christine, you can't. Monday week. Take the time to rest and recover. Report to Chief Superintendent Charlotte Mackensie at 10 am. She's good people Christine. She runs a tight ship."

"Thanks, Bob, I'm sorry it ended this way."

"Not as sorry as I am, Christine."

## Chapter 3

The home Bob Fisher had found for Christine after five months of home recuperation was with the South West London Crime Squad. Despite not being fully fit, Christine relentlessly badgered Bob Fisher to find her somewhere. And now here she was, Detective Sergeant Christine 'Gopher' Woolfe. Christine ran the team, doing the admin and taking it easy. She would 'gopher' banal meetings and 'gopher' witness statements, but drew the line at 'gopher' coffees. Rank had its perks, after all. Still, things were looking up, and it was far better than the daytime TV alternative.

The area was knee deep in a placate the angry natives' job at present. A small group of young rascallions had been ripping the arse out of the crime squad's policing area, sometimes breaking into three or four posh drums a night. The Guardian-reading, golf-playing and taxpaying homeowners were none too pleased. Christine believed one homeowner played golf with the local MP or maybe the Commissioner, which explained the urgent summons she had got a couple of days ago from Charlotte Mackensie. She was a uniform supervisor through and through, but she welcomed Christine with open arms when she first arrived. Rumour had it she had been a decent enough thief-taker during her short time on the streets before ambition and luck had started her on the path to greatness. Now, approaching the end of her career, Mackensie wanted nothing more than a peaceful life and not to get shat on. As Bob said, she ran a tight ship. She projected efficiency in her crisp uniform jacket and skirt. She talked Oxbridge, but sometimes her Peckham roots glimmered in her choice of words.

"Christine," she said as Christine walked into her office, "I want your team to take this on. I'm getting dumped on from on high, and as you know, it only rolls one way. The intelligence team thinks they have identified one of the gang members, Dennis Armstrong. In an ideal world, short-term surveillance should identify the rest of the gang and wrap this up."

She handed Christine the file and fixed her gaze on the pile of documents on her desk, making it obvious the meeting was over.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Christine and left her office.

Grabbing a mug of coffee, Christine sat at her desk and started to read through the thin file. Dennis 'Spider' Armstrong, 25, white, medium build, 1.7m tall, with an address in Morden, South London. She perused his Crimint record. Wow, form as long as both of her arms and twice as stupid. In the past, his preferred method of earning an income was street muggings. But he had a problem. Because he's stupid; some years before, he'd had a spider's web tattooed over the left side of his face. He found even the 'oldies', his victims of choice, could not fail to notice the tattoo. He kept getting nicked. Then, in a flash of genius, he had splashed out some of his hard-stolen cash and had it removed. No one mentioned the tattoo now—they just described a big red scar shaped like a spider's web. Night-time burglaries were his thing now.

Fed up being office-bound, Christine allocated herself to the surveillance team for the following night. Back into action, doing good for King and Country.

#### Chapter 4

Why did she volunteer for this? Midnight, falling snow, icy roads and...

Christine turned to Bob Jackson, her partner for the night, "What the fuck is up with this car, Bob?"

With a sheepish glance, Bob tried again to coax something greater than frozen air out of the heater.

"Sorry, Chris. The pool guy 'as stitched us up good 'n proper, my bad," he said in his strong South London accent.

Christine asked why it was his fault, and he explained, "Recently I had cause to detain a youth trying to 'ave it away on 'is toes with me briefcase 'n car stereo."

When Christine inquired how that resulted in a decidedly sketchy pool car with no heater in the middle of a snowstorm, Bob informed her, "The youth is the pool guy's nephew."

Christine tried to decide if getting angry would warm her up. She decided not, so she shook her head and called Bob a tosser.

She picked up the radio and checked in with the team. She had strategically placed three other cars and a poor sod in the back of a van with sight of Armstrong's front door.

"DS Woolfe to eyeball, any change?"

The poor sod replied, "Certain bits of me have a lot less feeling than when I woke up this morning, but apart from that—negative."

Christine shivered. But she could move around. If he moved, he might give the game away. She almost felt sorry for him... almost.

Christine keyed the mike, "Do what you can to stop the important bits falling off. We'll call it a night if nothing stirs by three."

Maybe the gunshot had affected her hearing, but she thought the burst of static coming from the speaker sounded like a string of naughty words.

Nothing happened for an hour, and Christine's resolve started to wane. Poor timekeeping and the sheer bone idleness of the criminal classes does more to keep them out of jail than anything else. Bastions of law and order get paid for a living and paid extra for overtime. It meant as a supervisory officer; she ran a budget and needed to keep an eye on the clock. The London taxpayers are not too keen on paying coppers to sit around doing sweet FA, waiting for the great unwashed to climb out of bed and nick something.

Bob had been steadily increasing the level of whinge for at least 40 minutes, and Christine seriously considered leaving the car before she did him some severe damage. Luckily, Spider picked that exact moment to surface.

"Contact, contact, contact—target out, out, out." Christine acknowledged and waited for further info. "Target to Zulu 1 and off, off, off towards Lodge Road. Loss of eyeball."

Christine knew Spider had left his home, got into his car, driven off towards Lodge Road, and was now out of sight of the popsicle in the van.

A textbook surveillance ensued, with cars swapping the eyeball at regular intervals. Spider was heading towards the good part of town. Come to mama!

After ten minutes, the eyeball told them, "Stop, stop, stop. Target out and on foot and left, left, left into... wait... Swallow Heath Lane."

Christine planned to give him enough rope to dangle himself, but not so much as to leave her open to criticism. Of course; best-laid plans... the team had a loss. Actually, it was down to PC Chambers. The same PC Chambers who will buy the team breakfast later.

Leon Chambers, 30, fit, built and the only Black officer on the team. He was soft-spoken and hadn't raised his voice to anyone. But, as a six foot three rugby player, who would chance annoying him?

When a loss happens, the team scrambles to determine where the target has gone based on 'time, pace and distance'. Considering the speed at which he was moving, how far would the target have gone in the time?

Christine, not one to blow her own trumpet, found the house. Not precisely a Sherlock moment. With snow falling, she traced the shallow footprints in the slush on the pavement from his car to a wall. She pulled herself up to look over the wall and saw an open window round the back of the place. The house was large, secluded by mature trees. Christine saw the alarm bell box, but no alarm was sounding. Disabled or not turned on in the first place?

Christine arranged for the team to surround the house, telling them they would wait for Spider to walk into their web.

He ran. Straight out of the front door, almost catching them out. They expected sneaky. He gave them full-on brazen. PC Chambers reduced his fine to a round of coffees with a superb rugby tackle halfway down the drive. Immediately, Spider gave them his best 'Shaggy' impression by repeating over and over, "It wasn't me."

Christine countered, "It is you and you're nicked."

Meanwhile, Bob, who had missed out on all the fun, wandered into the house and a few minutes later wandered out again, looking like he had seen a naked, murdered woman slowly cooking on her bed—which, as it turned out...

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Sometimes, Christine would have preferred to be a lowly nobody with no responsibility whatsoever. Instead, because she had sat and passed the sergeant's exam a few years before, she took on the role of head nanny at a nursery. Seven officers stared at her childlike with blank looks on their faces. Bob relayed to all what he had found in the house, accompanied by the same 'Shaggy' backing track, until Christine ordered Spider to be taken to the station.

She detailed two officers to search the ground floor while she followed Bob up the stairs. They were careful to disturb as little as possible at the scene and en route. Cooked humans do smell like roast pork, but the smell assaulting her nasal cavities halfway up the stairs resembled roadkill, warmed by the summer sun. Bob had done well to make it as far as the bedroom the first time, and he wasn't chomping at the bit for a return visit.

The room was huge, at least compared to Christine's flat, as was the bed. The naked woman was lying on her back, eyes open. Christine recalled in the past, people used to place pennies on the eyes of dead bodies to keep their eyes closed. The woman looked well and truly dead. In books, when the author says the victim looked like they were asleep? Bollocks, dead is dead, pale and cold; they don't call it a deathly pallor for nothing.

She had what looked like expanding yellow foam, the sort plumbers use, filling and protruding from her nostrils and mouth. Two fingers of her left hand were in her mouth, encased in the foam. She had foam smeared on her right hand. As the killer squirted the foam, she must have known she was dead. She had died trying to clear her airway. Not a nice way to go.

Christine noticed a few drops of blood on the bedsheets near her left ear and dried blood in the left ear canal. Had the killer injected something?

Nothing appeared out of place or rummaged, and the timing was off, so she was right in her assumption Spider was not their guy. She told Bob to return to the front door and start an MI log sheet. Good for the continuity of evidence. It would also stop 'looky loo's' passing by and screwing up the crime scene. Not members of the public, cops. Curiosity was part of cop DNA.

Alone in the room, Christine took a few to calm down and gather. There was a silence in death. After the trauma and cacophony of the event, there's always silence. Silence for the deceased, but also for those around. A little bubble of peace before the inevitable jolt back into reality. The victims had lost their voice, but she and her colleagues sought to restore it long enough so the victim could accuse their killer. She often thought Samantha called to her. That's why she became a copper in the first place. She couldn't blame anyone else for what was her fault. Put up or shut up.

Now she had to get her act into gear. The first thing was to arrange forensic and the local CID down to the scene. Christine hoped she would remain on the murder investigation. But, it didn't do to step on local toes until your boots were official. She used her mobile rather than put the details over the air, then rang her boss, who said he was calling the Major Incident Team.

Detective Chief Inspector Steve Balcombe from MIT called ten minutes later and was surprisingly pleasant, considering her discovery had woken him at 3.17 am. Christine explained the situation and asked how she should proceed. The DCI told her to keep a lid on things until he rang back.

In the meantime, she looked carefully around the bedroom. The victim was Sarah Jessica Davies. She was 34, the same age as Christine, but born two months earlier in June. Her driving licence and a company ID swipe card were on the dressing table. She worked for a soft drinks distributor based in South West London. It didn't specifically spell out what she did for the Company, but from what she'd seen of the house and the clothes in the section of the open wardrobe, Christine guessed some kind of middle to high-level executive. She had done well for herself. Except now she was dead.

Bob called up the stairs. The local CID had arrived, and a young, fresh-faced DC joined Christine in a green Parka, a 'Mott the Hoople' T-shirt, jeans and trainers.

He held out his hand. "DC James Menday, night duty CID."

He must have caught her looking at his attire as he added, "Yeah, sorry, we had a drug raid planned for 5 am. Cancelled it on the way over, as we'll be busy."

Christine took off her latex glove and shook his hand. "DS Woolfe, Christine, Crime Squad. Are the SOCOs on their way?"

DC Menday stepped closer towards the bed and wrinkled his nose at the smell. "They should be. After you notified them, Control called the team."

He squatted down for a better look at the head. "Damn, that looks nasty."

Christine's mobile rang. The DCI. "Hello, sir, night duty CID has arrived, a DC Menday and forensics are close behind... Ok, that's great, see you shortly." She hung up.

"James, that was DCI Balcombe. He's on his way; be here in about 40 minutes. In the meantime, this is now officially an MIT case. You are the local liaison. He's cleared it with your boss, and I, for my sins, am the exhibits officer."

Stoked as she was to be the exhibits officer, her problem lay with the responsibilities of the role. The XO had to be present at the postmortem, especially since she had been the first officer on the scene. Despite having encountered her fair share of dead bodies throughout the years, she never grew accustomed to it. The mere thought of witnessing a dissection mere feet away filled her with dread.