



AUTHOR'S NOTE: When I first came up with the idea for this story, I'd imagined the events taking place in London. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that the storyline could only work if it were set in the US. For this reason, the story has been written in American English.

Heartbeat

Neon-pink fliers littered the sidewalk outside Green Lake Terrace Apartments for the third morning in a row.

“For Christ’s sake,” Naomi muttered. She peeled one off the windshield of her ancient Subaru and crumpled it in her fist. Looking up the road, Naomi saw a stream of red brake lights snaking around the curve. “Oh, hell, no!” she said aloud, then climbed into her car and tossed the flier over her shoulder into the back seat with the others.

Sergeant Zhōng looked up from his podium. “You re late, Townsend.”

Naomi took the empty chair in the front row next to her partner, Marcus Underwood. “My apologies, sir. It’s March for Life day. Slipped my mind.”

Several uniformed officers at the back of the briefing room groaned.

“Which reminds me,” Zhōng said, sifting through a stack of paperwork. When he found what he was after, he continued. “Expect heavy traffic and disruptions—possible rioting—around Green Lake throughout the day. We’ve called in reinforcements from Seattle Central. It looks like the protestors are coming out in hordes this year.”

“They already have, sir. It s chaos,” Naomi said. “I had a hell of a time getting here.”

“At any rate, uniforms will patrol today’s rally. We here have bigger things to deal with,” Zhōng said. Glancing around the room, he added, “Another body was found early this morning, this time in Ballard.”

“Jesus,” Naomi said under her breath, and took a notebook out of her breast pocket.

Zhōng turned toward the large screen behind him and brought up a still, which showed a middle-aged Black woman in a blood-soaked gray hoodie and dark yoga pants, gagged and slumped against a lamppost.

“Bernadette Trainor-Jones, 48, residing at 77 Sound View Drive with Grayson Jones, 52, and son, Dylan Jones, 17, was discovered by two teenagers in the Hiram Locks parking lot at zero-two-hundred-hours,” Zhōng began. “Probable cause of death—gunshot to the heart at close range. Garcia and her team are working the scene, and we’ll have more information once the Medical Examiner files his report. But this is a homicide, no doubt about that.”

Naomi scribbled into her pad. “Is it a domestic, Sarge? Has her husband been brought in?”

“Both Mr. Jones and the son were out of state at the approximate time of death. They’ve been notified, and their flight is landing at Sea-Tac as we speak. We have no suspects at this time, and no witnesses have come forward.”

“That’s three open cases in two weeks,” Marcus said. “Are we talking *serial* here?” Audible murmurings filled the room.

That the murders might be related had not occurred to Naomi until Marcus said *serial* out loud. Or maybe she had just suppressed it—too ominous to think about. She looked at her notes.

1/11/22 Tompson, Amanda, white, 20, student@UW, knife wound, Ravenna Woods

1/15/22 Whitfield, Linh-ha, Asian, 37, divorced care worker, ~~asphyxi~~ suffocated, Fremont

1/24/22 Trainor-Jones, Bernadette, Af-Am, 48, gunshot, Ballard, Hiram Locks

The homicides appeared to be isolated cases. She’d seen the crime scene photos; nothing glaringly obvious linked the three victims. But something didn’t sit well with Naomi—a niggling *something* she couldn’t put her finger on.

Zhōng coughed into his fist, shutting down the mumbling. “Let’s not jump to conclusions, folks. There isn’t sufficient evidence to support Underwood’s conjecture,” he said, then drew a deep breath. “But I’m not saying we’re ruling it out.”

“Put us on the case, Sarge,” Naomi jumped in. The North Precinct hadn’t handled a serial since the mid-seventies. If these seemingly random murders did indeed develop into something more sinister, Naomi wanted in.

“You sure you can handle a homicide, little lady?” Anders heckled from the back row. Naomi didn’t react. She knew better. Anders was a chauvinist prick—but as the squad’s chief pencil-pusher, he had his uses.

Zhōng sent Anders a malignant glare. “Townsend, Underwood—talk to Garcia and see what you can dig up.”

Naomi glanced back at Anders and flashed him a “Suck on that!” grin.

“Still driving that old Subaru, I see. You ever gonna get that front bumper fixed?”

Naomi’s gut tightened—knew that voice right away. How could she not?

“David . . .,” she said, turning to face her greatest regret, her deepest shame. “What brings you to our neck of the woods?”

“Brought in a couple of over-zealous protesters at Green Lake.”

“The March. Of course.”

“I was hoping to run into you. How long has it been, Townsend?”

Four years, eleven months, and two weeks. “Gosh, four, maybe five years?”

“That long? Well, you look great. And kudos on making detective. I always knew you had it in you.”

Still the sweet-talker, Naomi thought. “Thanks.”

“What do you say we grab a bite and catch up?” David suggested. “I know a fantastic new Greek place in Phinney Ridge. Or how about we go to the Ale House, for old time’s sake?”

A lamb kebab and cold beer would hit the spot, *for sure*. But the last thing Naomi wanted right now was to sit across from David making small talk—and avoiding . . . the topic.

“It’s been a long day, David. And it’s late. Raincheck?” She smiled, hoping to give the impression she’d meant what she said.

“I’m gonna hold you to that,” he said, backing away. “Great seeing you, Townsend.”

She could’ve left it at that, gotten into her car and driven away. *End of.* But Naomi didn’t actually *hate* David, and she wasn’t heartless.

“Um, David?”

He stopped, a glint of hope in his blue-gray eyes.

“I should’ve reached out to you when . . .,” she began, “. . . about your wife’s passing. I’m so sorry.”

The pattern was unmistakable, the killer’s *modus operandi* clear.

“All three women were on foot, sir,” Naomi told Zhōng. “Bernadette left her weekly Zumba class four blocks from her home at 18:10 on the evening before her body was found. Her home-surveillance system never registered her return.”

“And,” Marcus said, pointing to Linh-ha’s report, “Whitfield left Wallingford Care Home after her regular shift and caught the 62 to Fremont. CCTV footage shows her leaving the bus at 19:25 on Stone and 35th, a ten-minute walk from her apartment. Never got there.”

“Tompson?” Zhōng asked.

“Amanda worked at the museum on campus every Thursday until 17:30,” Naomi said. “According to the roommate who reported her missing, she *always* walked the seven blocks home. We suspect the killer knew these women’s schedules and was stalking them, sir.”

Zhōng leafed through the reports, frowning.

“There’s more,” Naomi said. “All three women’s last names began with T. Trainor, Tompson, and Treung—Linh-ha’s maiden name.”

“How the hell did we miss that?” Zhōng said.

“We believe the perp’s working off some kind of list, sir,” said Marcus.

“Any leads?”

“Not yet. We’ve investigated all potential avenues that could connect the women. Social media. Employment history. Former addresses. School records. Bernadette’s Zumba class register, Linh-ha’s patients and their relations ... museum visitor logs But so far, nothing.”

“Whitfield spent several weeks at The Oasis domestic abuse shelter in late 2018,” Marcus added. “They won’t release confidential information without a court order, but we know from speaking to family and friends that neither Trainor nor Tompson was ever a resident there. So nothing there, it seems.”

Zhōng stared at the two of them. “If we don’t handle this right, all hell will break loose. You know that, right?”

“But we can’t *not* inform the public, sir,” Naomi said. “Women need to know there’s a killer on the loose.”

Naomi chugged half a bottle of Redhook—her fourth. “I bumped into David the other night,” she said to Rachel, her best friend on the force. “Or, rather, he bumped into me.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “David *Oliver*?”

Naomi nodded. “He was working North on Monday and approached me in the parking lot. Asked me out to dinner, which I refused.”

“I should hope so.”

The Roosevelt Ale House—a pub popular with professional singles—was unusually quiet for a Friday night, which was to be expected, now that news that a serial killer was stalking the city’s women had made the front page. Rachel and Naomi sat alone at the bar.

“Does he know?” Rachel asked.

Naomi shifted on her barstool. “No!”

“I heard he’s got some young thing from West Seattle that he’s messing around with. You’d think he’d have learned his lesson, especially after ... what happened.”

Naomi wasn’t surprised. David had a rep for seducing impressionable recruits. Naomi should know. She’d been one.

But she’d been younger then. Reckless. *Stupid*. “Julia, was it? The one before this ... new one?”

“*Julee*. Julee Torres. Didn’t last long. Poor thing quit the force shortly after the accident, and ... Come to think of it, I don’t actually know what’s happened to her. She disappeared off the radar.”

“She should’ve just put in for a transfer. Like me.”

“You know she was carrying twins, don’t you?” Rachel asked.

“Who? Julee? I’d heard something through the rumor mill but ... *twins*?”

“Not Julee. *Kirsty*. David’s wife. They’d been trying for *years*, apparently. Paid for IVF in the end.”

Well, the fertility problem hadn’t been with David, Naomi thought, then kicked herself for being so callous and petty.

“Julee turned up at their house ... just burst right in and told Kirsty all about her affair with her husband, with David standing right there, which was bad enough,” Rachel continued, enjoying relating the gossip. “But then she said she’d been pregnant but had *taken care of it*. And just like that, Kirsty stormed out and ... ran that red light. DOA. She *and* the twins.”

“I had no idea. Been kind of avoiding ... didn’t really want to know all the details.” For someone who’d only recently lost his wife of ten years and two unborn children, David, she thought, had acted pretty together.

“My guess is, Julee’s abortion pissed Kirsty off more than the affair itself—her being a lifer and all,” Rachel went on.

“A lifer?”

“You know. *Pro-Life*. Like those backward-ass Red states that are trying to pass the Heartbeat Bill? Kirsty was all for it. David, too, if you can believe that. The freaking horny hypocrite. It was Kirsty who organized all those clinic protests. She even led the March in Seattle last year.”

That’s when it hit her—that niggling something that had been lurking in Naomi’s mind.

She drained her bottle, grabbed her bag, and jumped off her barstool. “Sorry, Rachel. Gotta go.”

Marcus and Zhōng stood with their arms crossed, staring at the dozens of crime-scene photos Naomi had pinned to the briefing room’s corkboard. She’d been there all night, piecing the puzzle together the best she could before calling the two in on their day off.

“This better be good, Townsend,” Zhōng barked. “I’m missing my kid’s championship game. So, what’s this alleged link?”

“The fliers, sir. They’ve been at every crime scene.” Naomi pointed to the photo of Bernadette’s body slumped against the lamppost. “There, stapled to the post above her head, a neon-pink flier. And here, in this photo of Linh-ha, you can see that someone pasted dozens on the wall under the bridge where her body was found.” She then pointed to a photo of Amanda. Mud-trampled pink fliers lay scattered on the gravel footpath all around the girl’s body.

She then brought out some creased sheets of pink paper, the fliers she had fished out of the back of her car after leaving Rachel at the Ale House. “These have been on my windshield every day for the past week,” she said. “They’re identical to the ones in the photos.”

Marcus took a flier and studied it, then looked at the crime-scene images. “OK, I can see that, but I don’t see how they link the victims.”

“The fliers were right there in plain sight. The killer intended us to see them. Which means that all three victims were somehow part of this year’s march or”

“Were doing something against it,” Zhōng said.

“My thoughts, exactly.”

Zhōng sighed. “It’s not airtight, but it’s a solid lead. Good work, Townsend.”

“OK, so where do we start?” Marcus asked.

“Already on it,” Naomi said. “I’ve asked Anders to pull up any case files involving Pro-Life and Pro-Choice rallies or protests in the past few months. We’re going to have to dig deep to nail this bastard.”

Anders dumped a file on Marcus’s desk. “Not sure if this report is what you’re after, but there was a break-in at a women’s clinic on December 19th. Nothing was tampered with or missing. Probably just some junkies looking for painkillers.”

Naomi looked up from her paperwork and called after Anders. “Thanks.”

Marcus opened the folder and gave the report a cursory glance. “This might or might not be relevant. I’m not quite sure what to make of it.”

“Let me see it,” Naomi said. “No one breaks into a clinic just for kicks.”

A Post-It floated to the floor as Marcus handed her the folder. Naomi leaned over and picked it up.

It said:

12/21 patient files missing confidential

Dr. Elena Ramirez 789-0000 ext. 2

“Has anyone followed up on this?” Naomi asked. Marcus shrugged. As she reached for her desk phone, she caught the name at the top of the report: Eastlake Women’s Health Care.

It had been five years, but Naomi had been a patient there.

Later that night, when the Uber driver dropped Naomi off by the Ale House, it was already dark. Thirty-seven hours without sleep, a new record. Walking to her car, her head ached, her eyes throbbed. Her body felt ready to shut down. Only one thing on her mind—get out of the jeans she’d had on for two days and crawl into bed.

“You should really get that bumper fixed, Townsend.”

Naomi froze.

Gripping her car keys in her left hand, she reached into her shoulder bag with the other before turning around. She could barely make out David’s figure in the darkness.

“Twice in one week, David. We need to stop meeting like this.” Her fingertips brushed up against the cold metal of the Glock 43 in her bag’s inside pocket.

“We need to talk.”

“Can’t it wait, David? I’m wiped out. How about dinner tomorrow at that Greek place you mentioned?”

David stepped closer. *Too close.*

“Why did you keep it from me, Townsend? We could’ve figured something out,” he said.

He’d been drinking. His breath reeked of stale bourbon.

“David,” she said, wrapping her fingers around the Glock.

“Why, Townsend? Why did you have to murder our child?”

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