

One bloody twist and the whole landscape's changed

Collide-O-Scope

Andrea Bramhall





Prologue

A chill wind blew across the barren-looking marsh. Connie tugged her collar up around her ears and pulled the zipper closed. She blew on her hands to try and warm them before tucking them under her armpits and stomping her feet to get the blood flowing. The late October chill made promises of a harsh winter, with snow, roaring fires, and mulled wine—promises that Connie hoped Mother Nature would keep.

She eyed the horizon, smiling as the first hints of pink muscled their way into the expansive indigo sky. The *clink clink* of steel ropes clattering against the masts reached her from the harbour less than a mile from where she stood. A sound too soft to be heard in the light of day, where the hustle and bustle of the tiny fishing harbour clamouring with tourists, sailors, and walkers, swallowed the tiny sounds of the night. Green and red lights flickered in the harbour. Fishing boats hauling their wares drifted on the current of the North Sea, as the wind died to nothing and the stars blinked out of sight. The eternal battle between night and day lost for another cycle, they no longer cast their ethereal sparkle across the glistening water filling the creeks that surrounded her as the tide continued its journey inland.

As the water continued to rise, it spilled over the banks of each shallow creek and swallowed huge swathes of

sapphire and heather-covered land. The flood plain known as The Saltings was already underwater as the highest spring tide of the year continued to rise. Connie was glad there was no wind. The last time they'd had a tide such as this, combined with a strong wind, it had led to half of the homes in the village being flooded.

A gentle nudge against her boot reminded her of her companion. She looked down at the dirty stick that had been deposited for her. The hopeful look on her beloved dog's face made her smile as she reached for the object of Merlin's desire. Her blue eyes were alert, and her dappled grey body was all set to dive into action and chase it wherever she threw it.

"Are you ready, girl? Are ya?" She prepared herself and flung the stick like a boomerang, laughing as Merlin bounded after it as fast as her legs would take her. Her body was soon hidden by the long grasses and bramble bushes that lined the Coastal Path. Connie chuckled, sighed out a long breath that fogged as it left her lips, and turned back towards the sea. The darkness was starting to give way to the daylight and she lifted her camera, quickly checking the aperture and shutter settings before clicking off a few shots. She reviewed them on the LCD screen as Merlin deposited her stick by her boot again.

Another distracted toss and she zoomed in as tight as the lens of her Nikon D5300 would let her. Eighteen millimetres to 300 millimetres gave her the best options for her two greatest photography passions, landscape and wildlife. Today she wasn't trying to shoot either. Today she was trying to capture images of an entirely different animal

plaguing the North Norfolk salt marshes. She ground her teeth and focused the lens tight on the lobster pots being hauled out of the North Sea. She clicked and reviewed the image. Too dark. She checked her settings, the aperture was already wide open, she'd just have to wait for the sun to rise a little more.

She rounded the steep steps that led down the embankment to the overflow and glanced out towards the hectares of arable fields covered in pink-footed geese feeding on the recently ploughed sod. A loud bang caused her to flinch and look around for Merlin as a flock of geese hundreds strong took to the air. Merlin cowered at her feet and watched the birds with suspicion as they squawked indignantly and flapped and made their way to quieter feeding grounds. Every field in the vicinity had them. Bird scarers. Noisy machines that sounded like a shotgun and were far more reliable than the scarecrows of old. After a while you stopped hearing them. They faded into the background of bird song, rustling leaves, cars, and people.

Connie shook her head at her canine's cowardice and bent to collect her stick. She threw it in the hope of distracting her from the scary birds and walked a little farther down the path as Merlin took off after her prize. She moved beyond the long shadows of the houseboat that bobbed in the foreground of many of her pictures. Merlin ran ahead, branch clenched between her teeth. She stopped a short way away and looked back to make sure Connie was still following and hadn't stopped again.

"I'm coming, Merlin. Good girl."

An egret flew across the marsh heading for Scolt Head Island, just the far side of the creeks and the other side of the raised sea defences she walked along. Normally, it was a shot she'd love to get—the long-legged and white-bodied bird she had once mistaken for a heron in her early days as a photographer. She chuckled to herself again. A twitcher she was not, but she'd learned a lot over the past six years. A lot about the wildlife, the geography, the politics of small village life, and more and more about the locals themselves.

“More than I ever wanted to know.” She lifted the camera to her eye again and refocused. The light was much better and the shots showed the detail she needed them to show. “Think you can threaten me?” She zoomed out a little. “Well, we'll just have to see who's bluffing, won't we?”

Merlin dropped the stick at her foot again. She looked down from the viewfinder and kicked the stick into the shrubs. The rustle was the only sound she could hear, not a breath of wind ruffled the rising surface of the sea. Every boat and cloud was reflected perfectly in the still water. She set herself again for another shot and her camera exploded in her hand.

CHAPTER 1

Kate Brannon zipped her black leather jacket closed, climbed out of her car, and made her way down the mud track. Rain splatted through the tree canopy and quickly became a heavy shower as she emerged from the trees and glanced out at the grey sky and sodden-looking marshland in front of her. She flashed her warrant card at the young PCSO, Police Community Support Officer, standing at the perimeter of the cordoned-off area. He lifted the tape to duck under while he held a dog lead attached to a visibly distraught animal.

“The duty officer and the DI are up there.” He waved down the muddy path.

She pointed to the dog. “What’s going on?”

“Dog was with the body, ma’am. The crime scene guys say they need to examine it for evidence, ’cos it was all over the body when they got here.”

She gazed at the poor animal. It was whimpering and barking, trying desperately to break free, seemingly intent on returning to the crime scene. Kate wanted to bend down and stroke it, try to soothe it a little, but that wasn’t a good idea. Not until the evidence on its coat was recovered. “Who called it in?”

“Couple walking the path, ma’am. They didn’t go near. Said the dog wouldn’t let ’em.”

“Has it been vicious?” She frowned at the dog. Its pleading blue eyes moved quickly from her face to the lead in her officer’s hand and back to its owner.

“No, not at all. Just didn’t want to let anyone near the victim.”

“Does she have a name?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been up there—”

“I meant the dog.”

“Oh, right, sorry. Collar says ‘Merlin,’ but she’s a girl.”

Kate chuckled. “Right. Better call ahead and get a vet on standby. There’s no way they’ll be able to examine her while she’s awake. Poor thing.”

“Right-o, ma’am.”

She patted him on the arm then glanced up and saw the white tent being hastily erected farther down the path. One thing less to worry about—losing any more evidence to the rain. She nodded to him and made her way through the mud. She wrinkled her nose against the wind, salty with a tang of iron in it.

She approached the uniformed man obviously directing the whole affair as he issued orders, his arm waving and people scurrying around at his behest.

“Sir,” she said as she approached. “Detective Sergeant Brannon.”

“Inspector Savage.” He held out his hand for her to shake, his grip firm. “Thanks for getting here so soon. On your own?”

“I was at home when my CO called. I only live in Docking,” she said, referring to the village just six miles inland from their current location. “My partner will catch up.”

“Jolly good. You new?”

“Moved to King’s Lynn from Norwich about three weeks ago.”

“Promoted at the same time?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.” A loud voice from down the embankment caused them both to turn and watch as a young police community support officer—PCSO for short—stood still, eyes fixed on the ground as a ruddy-cheeked man offered him some sound advice. Loud enough for everyone to hear.

“This is a crime scene, you bleeding imbecile. You do not, I repeat, do not come wandering over for a look without taking precautions. Do you hear me, boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And why do you not come wandering over to take a little look at the scene without taking precautions?”

“So that I don’t contaminate the scene.”

“Or destroy evidence.”

“Or destroy evidence, sir.”

Kate could see the spittle flying from the corners of his mouth as he continued to dress down the young man.

“The five building blocks of an investigation, lad. Tell me?”

“Sir?”

“The five building blocks. Come on. You went through the training. Tell me.”

“Sir, I’m not sure—”

“I’ll give you a hint. Number one. Preserve life.” He pointed to the tent that was almost fully erect now. “Can we do her any good?”

“No, sir.”

“Right. So what’s next?”

“Preserve the scene, sir?” His voice was timid. Asking a question rather than answering.

“Halle-fucking-lujah. Then what do we do?”

“Secure evidence.” The young man responded with more confidence. “Identify the victim and then identify the suspects.”

“Brain of Britain you are, mate. Brain of Britain.” He tapped the guy on the cheek. “So where in that little list does it tell you to walk through my crime scene with no overshoes, no coveralls, and touching any bloody thing you like on the way?”

“Nowhere, sir.”

“Exactly.” He leaned back. “Now get the fuck out of my sight, off my crime scene, and hope like fucking hell I don’t take this to your CO and enjoy watching you issue parking tickets for the rest of your natural. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.” The young man clambered up the steep embankment and headed away from the scene, almost as though he were heading out to sea, but Kate knew what lay in that direction. It was a path she’d walked several times over the last three weeks. There was a turn-off to a small village a half mile or so farther on. She figured he’d been assigned to prevent walkers heading towards the crime scene. The ruddy-cheeked man watched him go, shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

“Your CO? Detective Inspector Timmons, right?” Savage asked, turning to Kate.

“That’s right.” Kate wondered if he’d take offence at Timmons dressing down his officer. He must have caught the look on her face because he just shrugged.

“Saved me having to read him the riot act and actually assign him to parking tickets for the rest of his natural.” He smiled and winked at her. “Is he going to be SIO on this one?”

“He will. Have you not spoken to him yet?” Kate thought it unusual for the Senior Investigating Officer to have not introduced himself to his uniformed counterpart.

“Not yet. It’s been bedlam so far, as I’m sure you can imagine. Not sure when he arrived to be fair.”

“Can you put us up for the duration?” She offered him what she hoped was a winning smile, and judging by the softening around the eyes, it worked. “We can run the investigation from here, then, rather than too-ing and fro-ing to King’s Lynn all the time. Stands to reason that the suspects will most likely be in the local area. Doesn’t make sense to base almost thirty miles away.”

“Fair point.” He nodded. “How many of you?”

“Say five of us, if you can lend us a hand with the witness interviews. Timmons, me, and another sergeant, plus a couple of DCs.”

“Sure.” He snorted a sardonic laugh. “Not like we don’t have anything better to do.” He sighed and pointed to the trees where she’d come from. “Well, I’ve cordoned off the Coastal Path for five hundred yards in either direction. I’ve got a PCSO on each entry of the pathway to stop anyone coming down until we’re done here. If they can manage to stay put, mind.” He pointed to the tent just as Timmons looked up the embankment, clearly spotted her, and beckoned for her to join him. She indicated she was on her way with a quick wave of her hand and nodded back to the inspector beside her.

“You coming down?”

He shook his head. “I’ve seen it already. We’ve got an unidentified female with a single gunshot wound to the face.”

“No ID on her?”

“No. Nothing on her but a phone and a set of keys. The dogs tag said ‘If found, please call my mum, Connie.’”

“Well, that’s a start.”

“Yeah. I’ve got the crime scene boys in there now looking for anything, but I’ve got to say there’s a lot of contamination from the dog, and probably just as much lost from the rain.”

Kate looked up and nodded. She’d seen the amount of blood covering the dog. She wondered if the forensics team would actually be able to get anything useful at all. They stood in the middle of nowhere, not a CCTV camera in sight. *Welcome to rural policing, Brannon.* “Mind if I take a look?”

“Nope. I’m getting some bodies here to help the coroner get the body up the embankment. Tell Timmons I’ll have the kettle on when he gets to the station. Hope you’ve not eaten yet.”

She didn’t answer him. There was no need to. Instead, she made her way down the steep embankment and pulled a pair of white overshoes out of her pocket and slipped them on. The Coastal Path sat atop a flood defence barrier. On the sea side the embankment rose up almost five feet, on the back side it dropped down a good six or seven. The water channels cut along the boundaries of the fields, a system of irrigation that had been utilised for a couple of hundred years. Along the steep side, brambles were well established, and the route down to the marquee was somewhat treacherous.

She pushed her hair off her face, noting it was about time she got it cut, and took a deep breath. She prayed she wouldn't land on her arse and make a fool of herself as she made her way down. Or even worse, destroy vital evidence as she did so.

Timmons waited for her. "Lovely day for it."

The drizzle was getting harder, or maybe she was just saturated now. Either way, it was bloody lousy. "Is that what you're calling it, sir?"

He chuckled. "Did he fill you in?"

She followed his gaze towards Inspector Savage as he spoke to an officer she didn't know. "Yes. Unidentified female, deceased, gunshot wound. Suspicious."

He snorted. "Well, that certainly sums up the pertinent facts." He flicked his hand in the direction of the tent. "Shall we?"

She nodded and stepped towards the structure as the PVC fluttered and crinkled against the wind.

"Ma'am," said a young man dressed in a white coverall, safety glasses, and a face mask. Kate waded through the long grasses and rushes, and the young man held back the door of the newly erected canvas structure.

"Safe to go in?" Kate asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Dr. Anderson is already examining the body."

She nodded and ducked inside, Timmons on her heels.

"What've we got?" Kate squatted beside another white-clad figure.

"And you are?"

"Detective Sergeant Kate Brannon." Kate held out her warrant badge, her picture clear for the examiner to see.

“Ah. Welcome to North Norfolk. I’m Doctor Anderson. Nice to meet you.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said. “And this is—”

“Detective Inspector Timmons,” Dr. Anderson said. “We’ve worked together before.”

“All right, Ruth,” Timmons said and pointed to the body. “So?”

“Female, Caucasian, approximately thirty to forty years old. Fatal gunshot wound to the face.”

“Savage said there was no ID,” Kate said.

“Correct. And I don’t have a picture for you to flash around to try and find someone who recognises her. Not without facial reconstruction anyway.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got a couple of ideas. You’re going to need a vet to knock the dog out when you collect the evidence from her. I’ll get them to check her chip and see if we can get a name and address from it.”

Anderson smiled. “I like the way you think, Detective.”

“Thanks.” Kate peered over her shoulder to make her own observations.

There was little left of the woman’s face to identify her. Long, dark hair framed her head in a tangled mess, lumps of brain matter and blood clumped indiscriminately. There was a small mole on the right-hand side of her neck. Jeans, stout hiking boots, and a thick purple coat covered the rest of the body. Her right arm was flung out, lying flat on the ground. Barely far enough from the edge of the narrow creek for them to get the tent over her without having to go into the water.

“What kind of weapon would cause that much damage? A shotgun?”

Anderson shrugged. "Maybe. But I wouldn't bet my licence on it. There's something in the wound that doesn't look like it belongs there." She leaned closer to the body. "Light's crap here though. I can't tell what it is until I get her back to my lab and have a good look."

"Fair enough."

"Are you planning to attend the autopsy, Detective?"

"Wouldn't miss it, Doctor." Kate quirked her lips. In all honesty, she'd love to miss it. There was nothing more clinical and dehumanising than watching victims being reduced to the sum of their parts in an attempt to learn what had happened to them. But it wasn't something she planned on missing. It also wasn't something she had to attend very often either. Small villages didn't throw that many suspicious deaths their way, after all.

"Do you have an ETD for us to start working with?"

"Given the temperature out here, her core temp, very little insect activity, I'd say she's been dead about four hours now. I'll have a better idea when I examine stomach contents if you can get me an ID and the time she last ate, but four hours looks about right at the moment."

Kate checked her watch. Eleven o'clock. "Around seven?"

"Approximately."

"Sunrise. Well, almost."

"And high tide today," Timmons said.

Kate nodded. "Nice time to walk the dog."

"Hmm. Unfortunately, that fur ball's done more than enough to contaminate my scene." Anderson waved in her assistant and together they manoeuvred the victim into a body bag. "The wound's been licked, the beast has got

tissue, bone fragments, and brain matter all over it, and I couldn't tell you from the surroundings if someone else was with her or not. All the grass is trampled with paw prints." She dusted off her hands and pulled her face mask down. "Then there's the rain."

Kate looked around again, committing the surroundings to memory. "So what you're telling me is, don't expect too much."

Anderson laughed. "That'll be about the size of it, yes."

"Well, it could be worse," Timmons said, chuckling.

"How do you figure?"

"Another foot and she'd have ended up in the water." He pointed. "Don't know about you, but I find late October a bit cold for swimming around here."

"Fair point, well made, Inspector." Anderson offered a quick grin.

"I'm going to ask around and see if I can get a bead on an ID. Do you have a number I can get you on in case I get something?" Kate asked.

"Sure." Anderson quickly recited the number as Kate tapped it into her phone before tucking it back into her pocket. "Thanks. I'll let you get on, Doctor. See you at the morgue later."

"Thanks."

"No problem." Kate ducked her head as she left the tent and spent a couple of minutes looking around, memorising as many details as she could, while Timmons answered his phone. She wanted to be able to remember everything she could see and feel, every sound and smell. What was the victim doing out here? Walking the dog? Who was she?

Local? Kate had to assume that was likely. Most of the cars parked in proximity to the path access were patrol vehicles, an ambulance, and her own car. Not a single driving visitor, so the victim must have lived, or was staying, within walking distance. How many “Connies” were there going to be in this village with a dog like the one they’d found with the body?

The doctor closed up the back of the van and waved as she climbed into the front seat. Kate looked over at the petrol station, lights shining brightly, cars moving on and off the forecourt. She grabbed her phone and clicked a quick picture of the dog before sending the PCSO off with her. No harm in trying a couple of things while she waited for the vet to get information from the dog’s chip, right?

Across the road was a row of shops, a cafe, as well as the petrol station with a convenience store inside. She’d eaten breakfast at the cafe just a couple of days ago. Nice bacon, free-range eggs, and strong coffee. It’d be worth a return visit in the near future.

Kate looked back over at Timmons, who was still on the phone and gesticulating wildly. She gestured at him and when she caught his attention, indicated that she was heading over to the shops and she’d be back in ten minutes. He nodded. Then she crossed the road, went into the petrol station, and walked straight up to the cashier. “Hi, I’m wondering if you can help me.”

The young woman behind the desk popped a big bubble and nodded. “Sure.”

Kate showed her the picture of the dog. “Do you know this—”

“How’ve you got a picture of Merlin?”

Bingo. “She’s been found on the marsh. Do you know who her owner is?”

“Well, yeah. She’s Connie’s dog. Isn’t it on her collar?”

“Connie who?”

“Connie Wells.” The girl pointed towards the far end of the shop. “She owns the campsite at the end of the row of shops. She’ll be frantic. That dog’s about all she cares about.” She wiped her woolly-gloved hand under her nose, wrinkling it as she did so.

“You know her well?”

“Used to work for her.” She sniffed. “For about three days. Bitch said I wasn’t cut out for working with an upper-class clientele, so being her secretary was never going to happen.”

“Was that recent?”

“No. About six years ago. When she first took over. I worked for the people who they bought it off.”

“They?”

“Her and her girlfriend.”

“Right. And they own the business together?”

“Humph. For now.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ah hmm.”

Kate turned around at the soft cough behind her. An elderly lady with a heavy shopping basket stood waiting. “Oh. I’m sorry.” Kate reached for the basket. “Here let me help you with that.” She put the basket in the well at the counter. “Thanks for your help,” she said to the cashier. “I really appreciate it.”

She tucked her hands into her pockets as she exited into the cold air again and turned in the direction the young woman had indicated. The sky blue-and-white italic “i” for the information centre was hung above the door, and flashing multicoloured rope lights blazed underneath the sign. She pushed open the door and stepped inside. A poster behind the desk told her she was in the right place. The grey-and-white dog with the blue eyes grinned into the camera while she leaned against the side of a woman with long dark hair, green eyes, a mole on the right side of her neck, and a warm smile. And with the exception of having a face, she looked remarkably like the victim she’d just seen zipped into a body bag.

“Hi, can I help you?” The blonde behind the counter smiled.

Kate flashed her badge. “Detective Sergeant Brannon. Do you recognise this animal?” She showed the woman the picture on her phone.

“Sure, that’s Merlin.” She pointed to the picture behind the desk. “She’s Connie’s dog and the campsite mascot. She has her own blog and everything.” The woman chuckled.

Without holding out much hope, Kate asked the logical follow-up question. “Is Connie around?”

“No. She hasn’t been in yet.”

“Is that usual?”

The woman shook her head. “No, not really. She practically lives here, usually.”

“Where does she live?”

“Just in one of the cottages on the other side of the farmhouse. Why?”

“How well do you know Connie?”

“Pretty well. I’ve worked here for two years.”

“Seasonally?”

“No, full time.”

“And your name is?”

“Sarah. Sarah Willis.”

“Are you the manager here?”

“No. That’s Gina. I’m just a tourism assistant.”

“I see. Is she here?”

“She’s in the office.”

“I need to speak to her.”

“Has something happened?”

“I’m afraid so. Please, can you ask Gina to come talk to me?”

“Of course.” Sarah picked up a small handheld radio and pushed the button. “Hi, Gina, can you come down to reception, please?”

A short crunch of static before a soft voice said, “On my way.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m afraid I’m investigating a suspicious death. This dog was found with the victim.”

“Oh, my God. What happened? What victim? Connie?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.” She pointed to the photograph. “This is Connie. Was it her or not?”

“Are you aware of any identifying feature that Connie has?”

“Like what?”

“A tattoo, maybe. A scar. Something like that.”

“She had an operation last year,” someone else said.

Kate turned towards the back door. A woman had one hand holding the handle of the door and the other stuffed deep in the pocket of a down-filled jacket. Shoulder-length dark hair peeked out from under a red beanie hat, and wide blue eyes stared at her.

“Where?”

“Appendix.”

“Thank you. Are you Gina?”

“Yes. Georgina Temple. And you are?” She offered her hand.

“Detective Sergeant Kate Brannon.” Kate took the proffered hand, her fingers wrapping securely around warm flesh as a jolt of electricity radiated between them. A tingle ran up her arm and her gaze locked onto beautiful eyes. They reminded her of the sea the last time she’d been holidaying on one of the Greek islands. She shook her head, aware that she was still holding onto her hand. “Thank you for coming.”

“No problem.”

“Can you excuse me for one moment? I just need to relay that information.” Kate held her phone up.

“Of course.”

Kate quickly pressed the buttons and asked for Dr. Anderson.

“You caught me just as we stopped, Detective. What can I do for you?”

“I have a possible ID on the victim.”

“Fast work.”

“Distinctive pooch.”

“So distinguishing features, right? What am I looking for?”

“Appendectomy scar.”

“Hold on.”

Kate heard the sound of a zipper and rustling as the doctor checked.

“Yep, got one. Probably about twelve months ago, I’d say. So who is this?”

“I believe she’s Connie Wells.”

“I’ll proceed accordingly. Keep me updated if you find anything different and I’ll be starting the autopsy at two. If you can get me anything for a DNA comparison, that’d be good.”

“Understood.” She disconnected and turned back to Georgina. “Sorry about that.”

“Connie’s dead?” Georgina’s hands trembled.

Not going there until the next of kin’s notified...and we have a definitive ID, of course. “I’m sorry, but I can’t comment on that right now.” *Like she’s going to swallow that line of crap.*

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

See? Sometimes Kate hated the procedures that went along with her work. But they were there for a reason. Well, some of them were. Georgina’s face paled and she seemed to sway backwards a little. Just enough to make Kate think she was going to collapse on her. Kate saw a chair positioned at a computer terminal. “Please, sit.” She turned the chair and gently guided Georgina towards it. “Miss Temple, I’m really sorry, but I do need to ask you some questions. Is it possible to close the shop for a little while, or can we go somewhere more private?”

“I’ll lock up,” Sarah said and scurried around the desk, fishing a key from her pocket as she did.

Kate focused on Georgina. The tall, willowy brunette sat shivering in the chair. Her eyes downcast, tears welled and slipped easily down her cheeks. “She was a good friend of yours?” Kate asked.

Sarah sniggered. Kate glanced over her shoulder.

“Yes,” Georgina said. “We’d worked together since she moved here. We became friends over the years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” Georgina’s voice was quiet, the tremble distinct.

“Do you mind answering some questions for me?”

She shook her head. “Anything. What happened to her?”

“That’s what I intend to find out. Was Connie often out on the marshes in the early hours? Around sunrise time?”

“Yes. High tide was early today. Seven, I think. And sunrise not long after, she’d have been out there today. Walking Merlin, maybe taking pictures if it looked like it was going to be a nice morning.”

“There wasn’t a camera with her.”

Georgina shrugged. “Maybe the light wasn’t good.” She pointed to some of the pictures hanging on the walls. “They’re all hers. The postcards too.”

Kate looked at the beautiful landscapes, colourful sunsets and sunrises over the marshes, boats on the water, birds in flight, a beach with half-rotted posts sticking out of the sand, rocky outcrops, and a windmill poking out of the mist looked down at her. “She was very good.”

“Yes.”

“Did she usually walk alone?”

“Yes, just with Merlin.”

“I understand she owns the campsite with her girlfriend. Is she here?”

Sarah snorted. “Not bloody likely.”

Georgina shot her a look. “I’m afraid this is probably the last place you’ll find Leah right now.”

“Leah?”

“Leah Shaw. Connie’s ex.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.” Georgina flicked her eyes up to Sarah and back to Kate.

It seemed as if she didn’t want to air Connie’s dirty laundry to the staff. Fair enough. “Do you have a key to Connie’s home?”

“Yes. There’s a spare set in the office,” Georgina answered. “Why?”

“I need to locate something with her DNA on it. A hairbrush or toothbrush, something like that. Would you mind taking me to her house?”

“Of course. I’ll go and get the keys.”

“Thank you.”

Kate watched Georgina leave.

Sarah cleared her throat. “Can I get you anything, Detective?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” Kate smiled. “Was Ms Wells a good boss?”

Sarah shrugged. “I’ve had better, had worse. You know?”

Kate nodded. She’d learned over the years that often keeping quiet and letting other people fill the silence was

more illuminating than asking questions, so she waited. She didn't have to wait long.

"She was planning to leave." Sarah spun her finger in the air, indicating the entire information centre. "She wanted to sell up and go back to where she came from, but she wasn't going to wait until it sold. She was going to close up after the October school holidays were finished. End of this week." She sighed and sat down. "She'd have closed and gone ages ago though if we hadn't already had bookings in for the holiday."

"What happens to you when this place closes?"

"Out of a job. Get lost, goodbye." She shrugged. "It's not much, but you know, some of us live here too."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm onsite staff. I live in the hostel as well as work here."

"So you don't have anywhere to live either?"

"Not unless I go back to my mum and dad's."

"Is it just you?"

Sarah frowned.

"Living in?"

"Oh, no. There's William, Rick, and Emma too. Rick and Emma will probably go to Rick's parents. They've got some caravan or something in the garden that they'll move into. It's William I feel really sorry for."

"Why?"

"He's got no one. He's literally going to be living on the streets when she closes—I mean when she was going to close this place."

"Wow. He can't find something else?"

"He's trying." She shrugged. "He's not had much luck."

“Sounds like it’ll be rough for him.”

“Yeah.”

“What’ll happen now?”

She shrugged. “No idea. I guess it’s up to Leah.” She rolled her eyes. “She’ll probably keep it open. Leave Gina in charge of everything.”

“How come?”

She glanced from side to side and dropped her voice. “She didn’t want to sell in the first place, but Connie holds—held—the purse strings. Nothing Leah could do about it. She put up the money for them to buy this place in the beginning.”

Kate frowned as the door opened and Georgina walked back in.

“Shall we?”

“Sure. Thanks for your help, Sarah.”

“My pleasure. If you need anything else, you know where to find me.”

She smiled and followed Georgina out of the door.

CHAPTER 2

Gina checked the road before leading Kate across the driveway.

“What’s the story with Leah?” Kate asked.

Gina glanced at her and pushed her hands deeper into her pockets. “You don’t waste any time.”

“We both know I’m trying to find out how your friend died. Do you want me to waste time?”

“No, I guess not.” Gina fought back the tears that threatened to fall again, instead focusing on the sticky subject that was Leah and Connie’s relationship. “Well, it wasn’t a good break-up.”

“Is there such a thing as a good one?”

She snorted a short laugh. “Good point.”

“What was so bad?”

“Connie didn’t tell me everything. She said she couldn’t deal with Leah’s crap any more. That she was sick of bailing her out.”

“What did she mean by that?”

Gina shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve worked with her as long as Connie, right?”

“Yes.”

“So give me your opinion.”

She sighed and turned the corner. “Fine. Leah was always the more...rash of the two of them. Hot headed, quick tempered, you know?”

Kate nodded.

“She never seemed happy either. Always needed more. Bigger, better, more than everyone else.”

“Sounds like a prize.”

“She was also creative, generous, friendly, and much more of a people person than Connie ever was. They complemented each other in a lot of ways. Compensated for each other’s weaknesses.”

“So what happened?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re right, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, but if they complemented each other, something had to change to split them up?”

“I guess so.” Gina didn’t want to go into depth about her suspicions as to why Connie had finally thrown Leah out. Her suspicions were just that anyway, suspicions. Connie had never actually told her what had happened, what had finally been the end of the road. The detective would speak to Leah and be able to form her own opinion. It’s not like Leah can hide her problems anymore.

Gina led her up the garden path and unlocked the door to the three-bedroom semi-detached house. Like many in the area, they had been built for farm workers more than a century before, and the flint and limestone walls of the traditional building style had always reminded her of the sandcastles she’d built as a child, decorating them with shells and pebbles. “This is...was...Connie’s house.”

“Thank you, Miss Temple.”

“Gina. Only my daughter’s teachers call my Miss Temple, and I’m sure that’s to remind everyone I’m not married.”

Kate smiled and Gina was struck by how it changed her face. The deep frown line on her forehead smoothed out and a dimple creased her right cheek. Wisps of auburn hair curled gently around her jaw and green eyes shone with apparent mischief as she pulled her lower lip between her teeth.

“Biting your lip, Detective?”

“Better than my tongue.”

“Really? And what is it you don’t want to say?”

“If I was going to tell you, I wouldn’t be biting my lip. So, tell me about Connie.”

Gina arched her eyebrow and waited. Kate mirrored her expression and cocked her head to one side.

Christ, she looks damn sexy like that. And that’s not even counting the leather jacket. “Fine.” Gina caved. “Connie was fastidious, quite shy and quiet until you got to know her, and she was pretty difficult to get to know.” She took a picture off the mantle shelf and held it out to Kate, sucking in a quick breath when their fingertips brushed, and a jolt of electricity shot through her body. Again. “That’s her.” Her voice sounded breathless to her own ears, and she could hear her own heartbeat pounding inside her skull. *Jesus, what’s going on with me?*

“Sarah said she was going to close it down and sell up?”

“That was her plan.”

“Why?”

“During the winter, a business like this haemorrhages money. Between utility bills and wages, it loses thousands over the winter period. By closing, you minimise some of that. Since she wanted to sell it on, she saw no reason to suffer the loss. By closing, she’d cut wages and bills

to practically nothing, she'd only have to cover rates and whatnot. By the time the new owners took it on, it'd be after Christmas and the place starts to earn its keep again."

"But surely it's worth less when it's closed."

"Grey area with a seasonal business. But it was more than worth any potential loss to her."

"Why?"

"She said to maintain her sanity."

"Where was she planning to go?"

"She wanted to go to the Lake District. Somewhere around Keswick, she said. Buy a little cottage, sell her pictures to make ends meet."

"Does she have family up there?"

"No. Her gran passed away about six or seven months ago. She was the only family Connie ever talked about. I think her passing had a profound impact on Connie. She was never the same after that."

"How so?"

Gina licked her lips as she thought of how her friend had changed all those months ago. Naturally reserved, Connie seemed to crawl inside herself even more. Getting her to talk was like trying to get blood from a stone, and she couldn't remember once seeing her cry. She knew that Connie's gran had raised her from being a young child. She was more mother than grandmother to her, but Gina couldn't remember one occasion where she'd seen Connie grieving. It was like she was numb instead, or maybe there was just too much pain for her to process. "She shut down, really. I think it was then that her relationship with Leah really started to fall apart. I think she gave up on her."

“Depression? With the grief?”

“I think so. But she’d never got to the doctor to get help. By the time she came out of it, or started to figure her own problems out,” Gina said with a shrug. “Leah was lost to her.”

“In what way?”

“She refused to say.” She kept her fingers crossed that Kate would move on to her next topic, because Leah and her newfound hobby was not something Gina wanted to talk about in any way.

“How big an impact would the closure have on the village?”

“Over the winter? Minimal. If it stayed closed, it would be huge. The village of Brandale Staithe has forty year-round residents.” She shook her head. “Thirty-nine now. It has two pubs, two clothes shops, a cafe, a grocery shop, garage, a post office, fish mongers, two chandleries, and a gift shop. With the best will in the world, thirty-nine people cannot sustain those businesses. During the season, the houses that sit empty fill up with tourists and the village population swells to four hundred.”

Kate whistled. “That’s a huge difference.”

“Yeah, but the campsite holds six hundred people per night. Without the income from the tourists, none of those businesses could sustain themselves throughout the winter. If the campsite were to be closed over one season, the impact would affect the whole village.”

“What were the chances of the business being sold over the winter?”

“Well, Connie had a buyer lined up already. But Leah managed to wreck that. Leah doesn’t want to sell, so I guess the chances weren’t great.” She could practically

see the thoughts whirling around Kate's head. Motive, motive, motive.

"Sarah said that Connie held the purse strings and Leah didn't have a say in the selling of the business."

Gina sighed. "That's true. On paper, everything was in Connie's name. Leah had some financial problems in the past. She didn't go into details, but I think she'd been made bankrupt at some point. Connie had inherited money when her father died years ago. She used it to buy this place, but because of Leah's history it was only ever Connie's name on the paperwork. Leah couldn't legally stop her selling, even though she wanted to."

"How did Leah wreck the deal then?"

"She sent letters to the buyer telling them that she was suing for half the business and that it was going to be tied up in court until the matter was settled. She managed to make it sound as though she had a case, which she legally didn't, and they'd get embroiled in it all if they bought." She shrugged. "She made it unattractive enough to them to back out. Connie was livid."

"How many people knew Connie was selling?"

Gina laughed. "Everyone did. Leah told everyone in the pub weeks ago. And I'm sure you know what it's like in a small village."

"Yeah, she may as well have put an advert in the parish news or something."

"Exactly."

"Do you have another job lined up?"

Gina shook her head. "No, Connie was keeping me on to keep things ticking over when she left and meet with

prospective buyers. Show them round, the books, etc. Then hopefully stay on with the new owners.”

“You live close by?”

“Next door.” She pointed to the adjoining house.

“Handy for work.”

“Yeah. And for Sammy’s school.”

“Your daughter?”

“Yes. She’s nine. She goes to Brandale Primary School.”

Kate nodded and glanced around the room. “You mind if I just have a look around?”

“No, not at all.”

“Thanks.” Kate left the room and Gina heard her talking, presumably on her phone, requesting people to come and secure and search the property.

She looked around. The fire was laid, ready for Connie to light it when she got home later that evening. A habit Gina had often teased her about, but Connie had told her how much she loved curling up in front of the fire, Merlin settled against her side, head on her lap, while she read one of her books. The snap and crackle of the twigs soothing her after a day dealing with disgruntled locals, or tourists, sometimes both. She ran her finger over the spine of the book that was set open across the arm of the chair. The overstuffed, cream leather acting as book mark instead of a turned corner, or the scrap of paper that Gina usually used. It was the new one that she’d gotten in the post just yesterday. Marian Keyes. She’d promised Gina she would lend it when she’d finished it.

“Oh, Connie.” Tears spilled over her eyelids and she quickly swiped them away. She sat down and stared about

her, unable to take in the details of a room she knew almost as well as her own. She'd lost count of the number of nights she'd sat on the sofa, the two of them putting the world to rights with the aid of a nice bottle of Shiraz, or just a bottle if the nice one wasn't on sale. Connie had been the first person Gina had confided in when she'd finally accepted she was gay. She smiled as she remembered how Connie had wrapped an arm around her shoulder, poured more wine in her glass, and told her women were fucking crazy and she'd best remain single. Made life simpler, she'd said. She already had the kid and a cat, what more did any rural lesbian really need?

Gina chuckled through her tears.

"Something funny?" Kate asked, as she wandered back into the room.

"Just remembering a conversation with Connie from years ago." She smiled sadly.

"Care to share?"

"She'd been here about eighteen months then. We were friends, but I was kind of holding her at arm's length. Heck, I was holding everyone at arm's length. Always did, I suppose. But I knew I could trust her, so I'd decided to tell her something that I haven't told anyone before or since."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry into the happy memories of your friendship. It's just that I have no idea right now what is pertinent and what isn't."

For some reason Gina trusted her too. She waved away Kate's concern. "It's okay. I don't think you're going to go blabbing to all and sundry."

"No, I listen far more than I talk," Kate said.

“Well, I bit the bullet and came out to her.” Gina grinned. Saying it again after so many years felt...weird. Kinda naughty in a sexy sorta way. *Gina, you make no fucking sense.* “Anyway, we got drunk. Damn good bottle of Rioja, if memory serves, and I told her I was gay. She told me that women are crazy and it’s simpler to stay single.”

Kate chuckled. “She might be right.”

Gina laughed. “Well, well, well. Another gay in the village, what will the vicar say?”

“More tea?” Kate sniggered.

“Oh, my God. I refuse to be pulled into rehashing Monty Python sketches.”

“But they’re classics. Besides, how do you know the vicar isn’t one of us?”

“Because I know his wife. Scratch that. That would be enough to turn anyone homosexual.” She gasped and clasped her hand over her mouth, wishing she could pull back in the uncharitable words.

Kate burst out laughing. “No, no, don’t hold back. Tell me what you really think, Miss Temple.”

“Oh, that was awful. I’m so sorry.”

Kate waved her hand. “Don’t be.” She tapped the side of her head. “Note to self, stay on Temple’s good side.”

Gina giggled and found herself unable to stop. Every time she looked at Kate, the bubbles of laughter rippled up again and erupted from her lips. She knew it was a form of shock, some sort of hysteria, but try as she might, she couldn’t stop herself. She covered her eyes and rested her elbows on her knees, trying hard to quell the ridiculous urge. “I’m sorry. That’s so inappropriate, I don’t know what came over me.”

“Miss Temple, I’ve seen people react in pretty much every way possible to the death of a loved one. Anger, denial, hatred, uncontrollable weeping, running away, screaming, you name it. Now I can add giggles to my list. And I’ve got to tell you, this is by far one of my favourites.” She held up two plastic bags, one with a hairbrush in, the other a toothbrush. “I need to get these over to King’s Lynn and I need to secure this house before I leave. Can I walk you home?”

“I only live next door.”

“I know. That’s why I offered. Not far to go.”

“Thanks, but I’m sure I can manage.” Gina hauled herself to her feet and pulled open the front door.

“Do you happen to know where I could find Leah Shaw?”

“Of course. She’s staying with Ally the Cat.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, sorry. Ally Robbins. We call her Ally the Cat for several reasons.”

“Which are?”

“One, she’s a tramp who’ll sleep with anything that doesn’t say no. You know, like a nasty, old tomcat?”

“Right, got it. And?”

“She doesn’t like cats. She shoots a pellet gun from her bedroom window at any that go in her garden, so they don’t kill the birds.”

“You’re joking?”

“I wish I was. Half the village had to stop letting their cats out.”

“Where does she live?”

“Other end of the village, two down from the entrance to the harbour.”

“Okay, thank you, you’ve been a great help.”

“No problem. Anything I can do. Connie was my best friend.”

“Can I get your number? I’m sure I’ll have lots more questions.”

“Oh, sure.” Gina quickly recited the number, as Kate scribbled it down in her note pad. “Again, I’m really sorry about the giggles before. I’m sure it’s shock or something.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Kate glanced at her watch. “I’ve really got to go now. See you again, Miss Temple.”

“You too, Detective.” Gina pulled open her front door and watched Kate turn up the collar on her jacket and head back to where she was no doubt parked. Head down, shoulders braced, she walked into the wind, her black jeans clinging to her tight arse, and tucked into a pair of soft leather boots. Damn sexy.

CHAPTER 3

Timmons was buckling his seatbelt when Kate arrived back at the entrance to the Coastal Path.

“Anderson said you were getting DNA samples,” he said out of the window.

“I’ve got them.” She held up the sealed bags.

“Excellent work, Brannon.”

“Thanks. Problem?”

“Yes. I’ve got another crime scene.”

“Related to this one?”

He shook his head, frowning. “Unlikely, but I’ve got three dead girls in the middle of King’s Lynn, possibly drug related. I’ll know more when I get there.” He handed her a piece of paper with three names and telephone numbers on it. “This is the rest of the team that was going to work this case with us. Stella Goodwin is an experienced sergeant. I’m putting her as lead on this, but you’ll both report directly back to me. I’m still SIO, but I can’t be in two places at once.”

She got it. Three dead bodies versus one. Town centre versus the middle of nowhere. Politics and money. If he wanted to keep his current level of funding for King’s Lynn’s Criminal Investigation Department, he needed to play the political game and keep the powers that be sweet.

“Goodwin’s good.” He winked at her. “You’ll do all right.” He put the car in gear and pulled away from the kerb.

“Right.” Kate glanced down at the page in her hand. It was a massive opportunity for her to show what she could do. Huge. *Better not fuck it up, then.* She ran her fingers through her wet hair and jumped back in her car. She turned west out of the cul-de-sac heading towards King’s Lynn and the mortuary.

The Queen Elizabeth Hospital at King’s Lynn was a sprawling mass of two-storey buildings hastily erected in the late 1970s, and first opened its doors in 1980. Prefabricated walls, with pasty yellow panels, loomed over her as she walked through the main doors and navigated her way down long corridors towards the mortuary. As always, the very thought of where she was going did more to make her skin crawl than the actual act she was preparing herself to witness. The fact that she knew—well, suspected—who she would see on the slab now, made it more important that she find out what happened. She wanted to give Gina that peace of mind.

She buzzed the intercom to gain access to the mortuary and took what would be her last deep breath for a while before she pushed open the door.

“Detective, right on time. No Timmons?” Dr. Anderson stood over the steel table, the body laid out, naked and ready for the post-mortem.

“No. He’s been called to another crime scene.”

“The dead girls in Lynn?”

Kate nodded.

“Like busses.”

Kate frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Murders. Haven’t had one round here for bloody ages. Now we get four in a day.” She picked up her scalpel and

set it poised in her hand. “Like busses.” Dr. Anderson must have decided to forego any further pleasantries, as she set to work with her blade. She was efficient, methodical, practiced. Each stroke of her hand was mesmerising in its clinically horrific dissection, every cut reducing Connie from human being to a collection of evidence. Every organ weighed transformed her from person to cadaver before Kate’s eyes. More than the sight of the blood, it was this that made Kate feel queasy—the dehumanisation of a woman who had lived and breathed, loved and laughed just a few hours before.

Kate hated this final act of desecration. Intellectually, she knew they needed to know everything they could possibly learn from the body. Every miniscule iota of information could make the difference between understanding what had happened to Connie and failing her again. But emotionally, she felt the violation of the victim deep in her soul. This may be her first big opportunity to show what she was really capable of, but it wasn’t the first suspicious death she’d worked. It wasn’t the first autopsy she had been a part of. And she suspected she’d never feel any differently about it. A part of her even wondered if she’d want to. Wouldn’t that be more worrisome? Wouldn’t lack of feeling, empathy, connection to the victim she was trying to find justice for be more of an issue for her?

Techs had long since taken the hair and toothbrush from her to begin harvesting DNA for comparison, to make sure, once and for all, that this was the body of Connie Wells, but Kate was in no doubt. She could see the small mole on the victim’s neck that she’d seen in the photograph on Connie’s

mantelpiece, and the necklace that had been around her neck was now sitting in an evidence bag on a steel table along the wall on the other side of the room. The distinctive downward-pointing triangle, with stones around the perimeter representing the rainbow flag, hung on a leather thong that had been tied around her neck. Perhaps there was some story behind it, some significance for Connie—besides the rainbow insignia—some meaning. A gift, maybe?

“Any idea yet what it is that’s in the wound, Doctor?” Kate asked when the preliminaries of the autopsy had been completed.

“Let’s take a look.” She pulled on magnifying glasses and gripped a pair of tweezers. Digging into the mangled flesh, she managed to fish out a few particles of something hard. Even Kate could see that they weren’t bone fragments.

Light reflected off the part of the surface that wasn’t covered in blood, refracting the light and casting a tiny prism onto the white floor.

“Glass?”

“Apparently.” Anderson placed several particles into a petri dish, then sealed and labelled it before retrieving another sample and placing it on a slide.

“Can you tell what it’s from? I don’t remember seeing any broken bottles at the scene.”

Anderson pushed the slide under the microscope and adjusted the lenses. “The glass does have a slight tint to it, perhaps some sort of UV coating.”

“Sunglasses?”

“Mmm. Maybe, maybe not. It doesn’t look that dark to me and it wasn’t exactly sunny at the crack of dawn this

morning. I can't see why anyone would be wearing sun glasses at seven a.m. in October in England."

"Fair point." Kate acceded.

Anderson looked up and nodded to the petri dish. "We'll get that off to analysis, find out exactly what the glass came from."

Kate nodded. "Anything else?"

"No. She was a fit, healthy young woman. Cause of death was a single gunshot wound to the head and it would have been instantaneous."

"Could it have been accidental?"

"Well, anything is possible, I suppose. But frankly, I don't see how. The weapon used was a high-powered rifle. Without knowing what interfered with the bullet's trajectory, I can't really get you a range or angle, or even where to look to retrieve the round, as it isn't in the skull. I'd suggest the water, but let's face it, pulling a bullet fragment out of that would be like tracking down doobyhorse shit. If you'll pardon the language. The water looks like my coffee in a morning, but doesn't smell half as good."

"So, even if I find a gun, you won't be able to match it?"

"Not right now, no."

Kate sighed and regretted it as the acrid smell of formaldehyde and blood invaded her nostrils. "How long for the DNA results?"

"Tomorrow, lunchtime. I should have analysis on the glass by then too."

"Great, thanks."

"Now, I get to go play with a sleeping dog."

"Have fun. What'll happen to the dog afterwards?"

“Don’t know. Does she have any family to take the dog?”

“As far as I know so far, she lived alone, recently broken up with her girlfriend, was getting ready to up sticks and move on in a couple of weeks.”

“Well, if the ex doesn’t want the dog, then it’ll probably end up going to a shelter.”

Kate shook her head. “Poor thing.”

“You want to watch this?”

“Nah. I think I’ll go and pay a visit to said ex and see if she wants the dog. If she didn’t kill her girlfriend, of course.”

“Of course.” Anderson winked at her. “Later, Detective.”

Kate pushed open the door and headed for the exit. She knew she was grinning, but what the hell. Flirty pathologists did that to her. She stopped at the hospital cafe for a coffee and managed to beat the parking attendant to her unticketed car. She pulled out of the parking bay while still pulling her seatbelt across her body and slipping her cup into the holder in the centre console, sloshing hot liquid over her hand.

“Shit.”

“Serves you right.” The parking attendant shouted through the glass.

“Yeah, yeah,” she whispered under her breath. “Bite me.” She shook the last drops of coffee from her hand and picked up her Bluetooth earpiece, hitting the speed dial on her phone as she flicked the stem over her ear.

“Timmons.”

“Sir, I’ve just come out of the autopsy and I’m heading back to Hunstanton now, to get the ball rolling with the team.”

“Anything interesting at the autopsy?”

“Massive head trauma from a single gunshot is COD as we knew, Anderson found something in the wound. Looks like glass, but there wasn’t anything at the scene that fit. No broken bottles, sunglasses, or anything. She’s sent it for analysis.”

“Do you have a definitive ID yet?”

“Awaiting DNA results.”

“Due in?”

“Tomorrow, lunch time.”

“Okay, until then?”

“I’m working on the victim being Connie Wells. Local business owner, recently ended a relationship, was closing down her business that was one of the most influential in the local area.”

“So, a number of potential suspects already.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good work. Next step, Brannon?”

“Check in with the team at our incident room, and then I want to talk to the ex.”

“Good. Goodwin’s expecting you. I want you and her to work as a team. Like I said before, she’s experienced. She’s also bloody efficient. and good with the details, the paperwork, running the books, and organising the facts. I want you out on the ground. You’ve seen the scene, you’ve already got a bead on the vic, and potential suspects. That’s good work, that’s fast. Keep it up and keep me informed. Take Jimmy Powers with you, and I’ve got another PC who’ll be with you this afternoon to partner up with DC Brothers by the name of Collier.”

She could hear scratching and rustling down the line. Like he was searching through the pages of a book for the

information. “Newbie. That’s why I want him with Brothers. This is his first case.”

“Got it.” *You don’t want the newbie DC with the newbie DS.*

“Just don’t let him fuck up.”

She chuckled and read the warning for herself in the words. “I won’t.”

“You’ll all be fine. Good people, all of ’em.”

“I’m sure, sir. Thank you.” She hung up.

The A149 followed the length of the coast from King’s Lynn to Cromer—sixty miles of open skies, blue seas, and sandy beaches to the left of her. Well, on a good day it was. Today wasn’t a good day. Today was a day of tractors, non-stop drizzle, and brown-grey water that looked as inviting as dysentery. The twenty-odd miles to Hunstanton dragged by slowly, and Kate tapped her finger nails on the steering wheel as she inched forward.

She pulled into the car park at Hunstanton Police Station and turned off her engine. She swallowed the last mouthful of her coffee as she opened the door, and tossed it into the rubbish bin just inside the door. She tried to shake off her impatience and restlessness and smiled at the desk officer.

“DS Bran...”

“Brannon, I know.” He smiled and offered his hand. “I’m PC Noble. Inspector Savage told me to expect you. The rest of your team are upstairs setting up the incident room.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am.” He pointed to a door. “Stairs are right over there. I’ll buzz you through.”

She nodded and pushed open the door when she heard the raucous buzzing. The solid metal rail was cold beneath

her hand and her boot heels clicked against the concrete stairs, but she could hear noise and banter ahead of her. Her team. Well, sort of. Shared...ish. Okay, so it was mostly Goodwin's team, but she was of equal rank and this was her first real opportunity to step up and prove herself. At any point, Timmons could step in and actively control it all, but his priority had to be elsewhere right now. Three dead girls in the town centre. Most of King's Lynn CID was going to be tied up with that investigation. She could ask him to step in if she didn't think Goodwin was up to it and she couldn't carry the load. But she knew it'd be a cold day in hell before she did that. If she could get a quick solve on this one, she'd show them she had what it took to go all the way. Inspector, chief inspector, superintendant, chief super. Fuck it, why not commissioner while she was at it?

Oh, shut up and focus on what you're doing before you fuck it up already.

She pushed open the door and looked around at their new incident room. The room was long and narrow, maybe ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. A guy in his late twenties, floppy dark hair obscuring his face, was busy setting up monitors at one desk, the other monitors already in situ. A blonde woman sat at one of the fully operational stations, diligently working away at what Kate assumed was the murder book. It was a detailed account of the investigation they would carry out, a catalogue of every decision made, why they made it, and what result it netted them. As far as Kate was concerned, the woman was writing the Bible.

A squeak drew Kate's attention to the whiteboard that was suspended on the wall at the end of the room. The final

member of the team was shaking a pen and trying to get enough ink to the tip to get it to write, but all it did was play a tune.

“Stella, you got another pen hiding somewhere?” he asked the blonde woman.

“Tons of ’em, chick. Want a pink one?” Stella asked.

“Ha bloody ha—” He stopped short at seeing Kate. “Sergeant, didn’t hear you come in.”

The young guy setting up the monitors straightened up, cable in his hand, and banged his head on the underside of the table. “Ow.” He rubbed the spot and scrunched up his face.

“Well, you were all hard at it,” Kate said.

The man with the pen problem tossed the dried-up pen in the rubbish bin and strode across the room, hand extended. “I’m DC Brothers. Tom.” He smiled warmly, his strong features creased with the signs of a lot of time spent in the outdoors, and a faint hint of tan lines around the eyes. She couldn’t stop herself from thinking that he looked a little like a panda in reverse. “The lad over there’s Jimmy.”

Jimmy, still rubbing his scalp, held out his hand. “DC Powers.” He was tall, with a wiry, long-legged build that made him look younger than he probably was. Kate had no doubt that the goatee was his way of compensating. At least it was neatly trimmed and well kept. Beards made her itch. Her father had grown one when she was a child, and seeing bits of food stuck in it had made her feel sick.

“Nice to meet you,” Kate said.

“Stella Goodwin.” Stella got up to greet her.

Kate shook her hand. “Kate Brannon.” She looked around the room. “Settling in?”

“Yes, the boys here have made themselves useful, and I think we’ve got everything we need.”

“Excellent. Let me fill you in, then.” She grabbed a pen from the pot on Stella’s desk and crossed to the whiteboard, quickly giving the details she had and drawing a simple line diagram of the crime scene. “That’ll have to do until we get the crime scene photos.”

“I’ve got the tide and sunrise times.” Stella read them off, and Kate added them to the diagram.

“We’re waiting on DNA confirmation of ID, but given the confirmation of distinctive features, I’ll eat my jacket if it isn’t Connie Wells.”

Chuckles went around the room.

“So, what’s the plan of attack, boss?” Tom asked, looking at Stella. She in turn looked at Kate with eyebrows raised, clearly offering her the floor.

“I want to speak to the ex-girlfriend first, and we need to get SOCO round to the victim’s house. I left a PCSO at the door and left a message on the number I had for SOCO, but no one’s got back to me yet.”

“I’ll chase that. You head out to the ex’s.” Stella picked up the phone and punched numbers from memory.

“We need to talk to everyone in the village,” Kate said.

“Everyone?” Jimmy asked.

“Yes. Without Ms Wells, there are thirty-nine year-round residents. From what Miss Temple said, every one of them had some reason or other to dislike our victim,” Kate said.

“Sure,” Tom said, “but not all of them will have had opportunity.”

“Exactly. Right now we need to start ruling people out.”

“Door to door?”

Kate nodded, still frowning at the board. “Yes, does anyone know Ally the Cat?”

Tom and Jimmy both sniggered.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Do you have an address?”

Jimmy passed her a piece of paper, the writing barely legible.

“Why?”

“Apparently, Leah Shaw is staying with her.”

“Really?” Tom’s eyebrows arched. “Didn’t think our Ally swung that way too.”

“Just because she’s staying there, doesn’t necessarily mean they’re sleeping together,” Kate said.

Tom sniggered again. “You haven’t met her yet.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

“That was Wild,” Stella said, hanging up the phone.

Tom let out a shrill wolf whistle. “Number four,” he shouted pointing to the ring finger on his left hand and winking at her.

“Fuck off,” Stella said, throwing him a caustic look.

“Who’s Wild?” Kate asked.

“Head of the forensics team working with us,” Stella said.

“Lover boy.” Tom whispered loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Stella glared at him. “He’s a happily married man, fuck wit. He’s not interested in me. I’m not interested in him. We work well together, and his wife’s lovely. Now get back to bloody work.”

“Hmm. What crawled up her arse?” Tom asked and ducked under the pen that was launched at his head. Kate chuckled.

“SOCO’ll head over there when they finish at the crime scene. They reckon a couple more hours out there.” Stella tossed Kate a card. “Plug that into your phone. Always best to go straight to the organ grinder, and Wild’s the best one they’ve got over there.”

Kate fished her phone out of her pocket and added the contact. “They find anything interesting?”

“No. That’s why they’re sticking with it.”

Kate shrugged. “You guys want a lift to the village?”

“I’ll stay here and start going over the statements the PCSO’s and PC’s dropped off,” Stella said.

“The walkers who found her?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Timmons said that we’ll be getting another body this afternoon. Collier.”

Tom and Jimmy groaned.

“Pack it in.” Stella warned them. “At least it means you’ll outrank someone, Jimmy.” She chuckled evilly.

Kate sniggered at the crestfallen yet smug look that slipped onto Jimmy’s face. “Right, enough chitchat, ladies. You two with me then.” She inclined her head towards the door as the two men followed her, grabbing heavy jackets as they went.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

COLLIDE-O-SCOPE

BY ANDREA BRAMHALL

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com