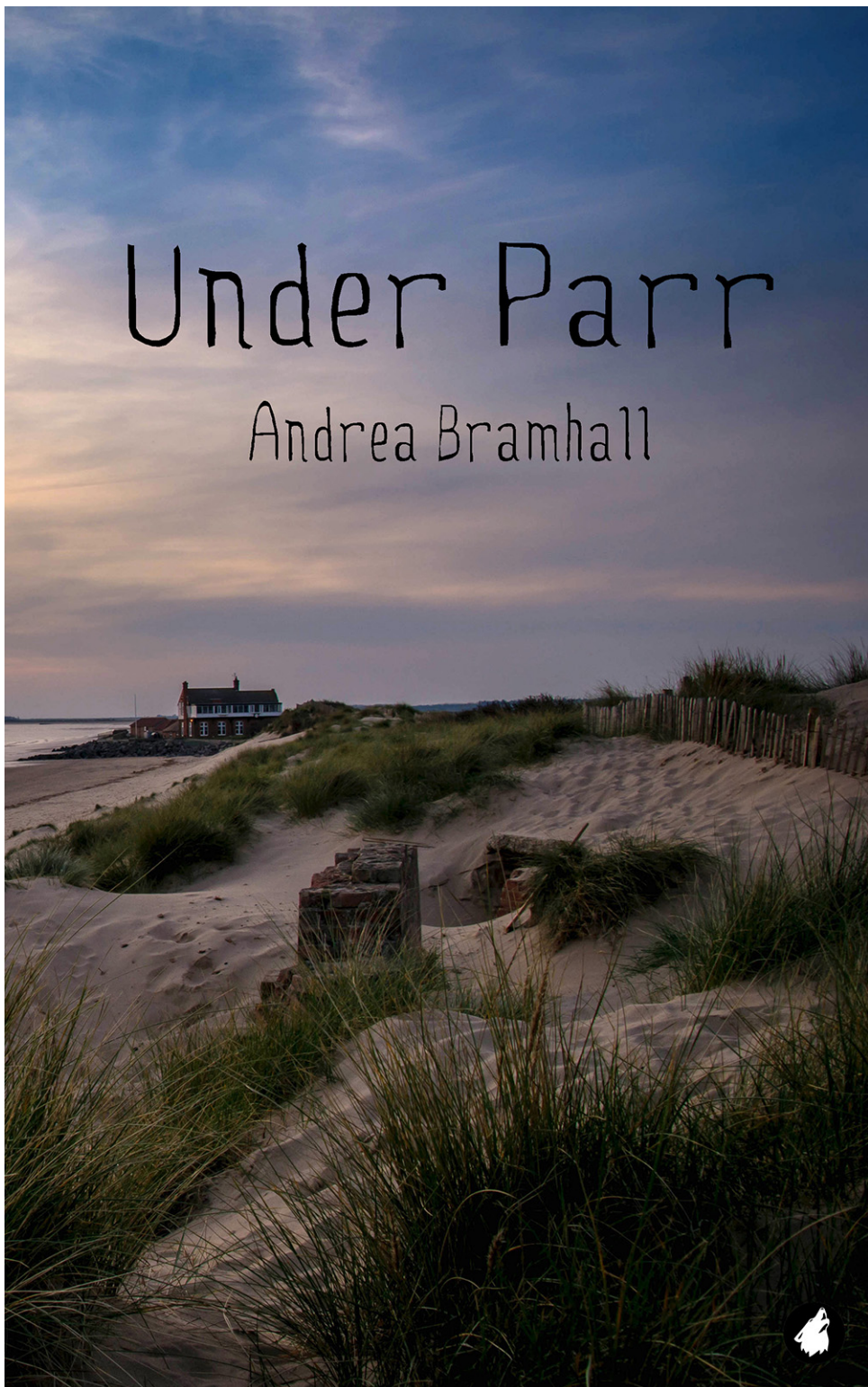


Under Parr

Andrea Bramhall





Prologue

Alan shuffled down the hallway as quickly as his feet could take him. The odour of stale piss, antiseptic, and old age assaulted his nostrils. Just like it did every minute of every day. It was no different in the dark of night as the snores of his fellow inhabitants indicated they dreamed the murky dreams of senility and medication-induced relief.

The cries of pain were something he'd become accustomed to. A fact that wore heavily on his soul. When he remembered, of course. Dementia was a cruel and unforgiving mistress. And the young people supposed to care for him—for them—were just as bad.

His dentures made his gums ache. The palette didn't sit right in his mouth, and the clothes he wore chafed. As though they were too small for him. He hobbled in shoes that didn't fit correctly and rubbed his heels while he tried to pull his dressing gown closed. It wouldn't reach. *Since when did my dressing gown have flowers on it?*

A shriek drew his attention from the ill-fitting garment and spurred him towards Annie's room as fast as he could. It wasn't the normal shriek of pain that he was used to hearing from that direction. This one was filled with fear, and then it had been muffled out.

He pushed open the door to her room and gasped.

A tall, thickly-muscled young man pushed a pillow tight against Annie's face.

"Get off her. You're hurting her!"

Her feet kicked limply at the bed covers.

"No, I'm helping her, Alan," he said softly, tucking the covers around Annie's body with his free hand. "See? You're just confused again."

Annie's feet stopped moving.

"No, no, no. You're hurting her." Alan rushed forward and grabbed his arm. "Don't hurt her. She hurts too much already."

“I know she does, I know. That’s why I’m helping her. I’m making her more comfortable, Alan.” He shook his arm and Alan lost his grip. “Go on. Go back to bed. I’ll bring you a cup of cocoa in a few minutes.”

Alan frowned. *Was he helping Annie? How was he helping Annie? Annie wasn’t crying in pain as she usually did. Wait, no, the pillow. She can’t breathe. Have to breathe.*

“No, you’re hurting her. Let her go.” He balled his fist and struck the man’s back. He grabbed at his white tunic and pulled as hard as he could.

“Enough!” The big man lashed out with one powerful swipe of his arm.

Alan stumbled backwards, and his head hit the doorjamb. He lifted his hand to the back of his head and whimpered when it came away bloodied.

“I told you, I’m helping her.”

“What are you doing to her?”

“I told you to go back to bed. I told you I’m helping her.” His voice was quiet but roughened with frustration.

“But you’re not...”

“Yes, I am.”

Alan noticed the dim light of the room reflecting off the man’s bald head as he reached across the small space and grabbed Alan’s ill-fitting dressing gown. He pulled Alan close before slamming him against the wooden door frame again. Alan’s brain rattled in his skull as his teeth smashed together through his tongue. Pain, sharp and tinged with blood, filled his mouth as his head pounded. It throbbed against the onslaught of blood that flowed around his body in preparation for him to do...something. Anything. To do what?

There was a tiny moan from under the pillow, and the man let go of Alan’s clothes and turned his attention back to Annie. “Stay there.”

Alan shook his head, trying to clear the pain and confusion. *He isn’t helping Annie. I have to do it. I have to get help.* He stumbled out of the room, barely noticing that his hand left a bloody smear on the wall.

His legs shook as he steadied himself against the corridor. He approached the nurses station, hoping to find someone, anyone, to help him stop the man hurting Annie. But it was empty. The small room had a desk, overflowing with papers, a humming computer, and a box of paracetamol with the blister pack of pills spilling on to pages of patients' notes.

"Must get help," he whispered.

He ignored everything in the small room and stumbled along the wall to the door. He tugged on the handle, but the door wouldn't budge. He tried again. And again. And again. He cried in frustration.

"Must get help." He turned and walked down towards the back of the building. "Must get help."

"Alan, where've you gone, pal?"

Alan's heart pounded in his chest and his hands shook as he moved as quickly as he could. He ignored the pinching at his heels and the chafing between his legs. He rattled each door as he passed, looking for anything that wasn't locked. Finally, one opened and he toppled into a kitchen. The room was lit only by the fluorescent light in the tall, glass-fronted fridge. The steel worktops glinted in its light, then fell starkly into shadow.

He could make out a door at the far end of the room, but as he rushed towards it he fell. His head throbbed. Blood ran down his cheek and dripped off his nose as he tried to push himself up. He balanced on his knees and put his hand to the back of his head again. It hurt so much. He slumped against the wall and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he couldn't remember why he was sitting on the cold floor in a room he didn't recognise. His head pounded and his vision blurred. He put his hand to his stomach in a vain attempt to quell the awful queasy feeling that burned in his gut.

"Alan? Come on, mate, let me help you."

Help. The word reverberated in his mind and focused him on what he needed to do. "Must get help." He crawled to the door and used the handle to pull himself to his feet. He staggered, and swayed as he

rattled the handle, and chuckled to himself when he saw the key in the lock. He turned it and almost fell outside.

Wind and rain pelted his face. Gravel crunched beneath his shoes, and his dressing gown was soaked, clinging to his skin.

“Must get help,” he called into the wind.

He had no idea where he would find help. He didn’t know where he was. Not really. There was something familiar about it, but that was all. Like a vague recollection of a dream from childhood. Dim and distant, and cold. So cold. He blew on his fingers to chase away the chill, then wrapped his arms about himself.

In the distance he saw a light. A warm, orange light shining in the vast, black nothingness, and it called to him. Beckoned him towards it like a siren’s song drawing a sailor to the rocks. He didn’t care. He didn’t know. He just walked towards it.

The salt tang of the sea clung to the road as he walked. The roar of the wind stopped him hearing the splash beneath his feet until the cold water seeped over the tops of his shoes and bit at his toes. But still the light beckoned to him, and offered promises that it would be everything he needed it to be.

“Must get help.”

He waded through water that reached above his knees now, and crawled forward when he fell. He shivered and his teeth chattered as he ploughed through the water, till the tarmac felt solid beneath his feet again. But still the light called to him.

Alan’s vision blurred, and he fell as the ground shifted beneath his feet. He spat sand from his mouth and scrunched his fingers into the wet grains. Rain mixed with blood and ran down his face, and then dripped on to the sand, but he couldn’t see it. He couldn’t see anything. It was too dark. Even the light that had drawn him there had forsaken him now. Disappeared from the sky like a star behind clouds.

He groped through the sand, always moving. Slowly moving. *Must keep moving*. Even the sand kept moving. Shifting, drifting down and away. Into the wind and away.

He felt the coarse marram grass tucked amongst the dunes and held on to them. They offered something solid in a world where everything continued to shift and move. Including himself.

Wave after wave of dizziness and nausea washed over him as the waves continued to crash against the shore. Higher and higher they came towards him, kissing his feet no matter how high up the dune he tried to climb.

“Must get...” He tried to remember the last word. “Must get...”

A ferocious gust of wind blew him flat on to the sand and his hand brushed against a rough slab of concrete half-buried in the dunes.

“Must get...warm.” He shivered and pulled himself towards the lump of concrete. Beneath it was a tunnel. A tunnel he remembered from...a long time ago. A happier time. He smiled and crawled on his belly down the shaft, tumbling to the floor at the bottom.

It stank. Empty bottles and cans strewn across the concrete floor rolled away from him as he groped about and crawled around the pitch-black space. But he knew where this was. He knew what it was. He'd played here so many times as a child. He and his friends had played soldiers in the old bunker. They'd hollowed out the openings for the guns and pretended they were on the frontline as their fathers and uncles all had been. They'd sat for hours, playing cards and smoking their first illicit cigarettes. Drank their first stolen ale and talked about the girls with the biggest bosoms in their class.

He leaned against a wall. Rough breeze blocks leeching what little warmth was left from his body as he closed his eyes and remembered better days. Days where his head didn't hurt and he didn't want to throw up. Days where he could remember why he was wearing a dressing gown that didn't fit him and shoes that rubbed his heels raw. Days where his teeth didn't feel wrong in his mouth. He remembered days where he could...remember.

CHAPTER 1

Detective Sergeant Kate Brannon tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel in time to the music. Emilie Sande sang about being a clown while Kate waited for Detective Constable Jimmy Powers to lock his front door. He had a slice of toast stuck between his teeth, his coat drawn up one arm while his other hand fumbled with the keys.

The small, square house tucked away in the council estate of Burnham Market where Jimmy lived was probably half the size of her own house in Docking. And probably worth twice as much. Even if it did lack “character” and was in the less desirable part of town, it was still in the town. What was it the man said? It’s all about location, location, location. And Burnham Market was *the* location to be in if you were on the north Norfolk coast. Every inch of space was developed or being developed, car parking was a nightmare, and the prices for everything were extortionate. But that’s what you got when you added a celebrity hotspot to a coastal location. *Damn you, Stephen Fry, Kiera Knightly, Natalie Portman, et al.*

She wound the window down and stuck her head out. “We haven’t got all day you know, Jimmy. The DI’s waiting for us.”

Jimmy held up his hand and shouted, “One sec. Fuck.” He cursed as he dropped his toast on to the wet ground.

Kate chuckled and wound the window back up.

Jimmy tucked his keys in his pocket, finished putting his coat on, pulled the wooden gate with chipped green paint closed behind himself, and then climbed into Kate’s brand new car.

She’d gone back to her beloved Mini after losing the last one to an unfortunate incident involving a car park that flooded at high tide, and a distinct lack of local knowledge at that point. She had diverted from the lovely sky blue colour she’d picked out last time, though, and gone

instead for the silver metallic grey in the hope that it would hide the road grime a little better.

She slid the stick into gear, checked her rear mirror, and pulled out on to the road.

“Can we—”

“No.” She cut him off. “We haven’t got time to stop at the cafe and pick you up some breakfast. Like I said, the DI’s waiting for us. Stella’s already called me—twice—to let me know that he’s not happy.”

“You’ve only been here ten minutes.”

“Twenty. And I was about to call the DI just because I was bored. What were you doing in there? Bathing in adder’s milk or something?”

“Very funny. It takes work to look this good, Kate.”

Kate gave him a cursory once-over and sniggered. “You keep telling yourself that.”

“Hey! That’s sexual harassment or something,” Jimmy said with a lopsided grin. He ran his fingers through his dark, floppy hair, then scratched at his goatee beard. At twenty-eight he was still fairly new to his detective’s position, but he was learning fast.

“You’re wishing, pal.” She turned left at the junction and headed north towards the sea.

“So where are we going anyway? Stella just told me to get ready because you’d be picking me up.”

“Brancaster beach.”

“Shit. I’ve been dreading this starting.”

Kate frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s just been a matter of time really, hasn’t it? Before the people smugglers started trying to get the refugees ashore. I mean we’ve got miles and miles and miles of coastline, no way can the coastguard protect it all. No way. It was only a matter of time before they started to bring boats straight over here instead of the rest of Europe.”

“And you think people smugglers have chosen Brancaster beach as their new landing site?”

“Why not? It’s as good a place as any.”

“Jimmy, you’ve got an overactive imagination.”

Jimmy laughed. “Right, after the Connie Wells case, I don’t know how you can even say that.”

Kate had to concede the point. The Connie Wells murder case had surprised them all. What they thought was a simple—for want of a better word—murder had evolved into a case she had never expected to come across in a sleepy fishing village with only forty year-round residents. They’d uncovered a huge drug-smuggling operation. One that Connie had tried to warn the local police about only to have them laugh in her face. So, instead, she’d tried to do their job for them, and paid for it with her life.

The quantities of drugs that had been smuggled into the country through the tiny fishing harbour made her feel sick. Thousands of kilos of heroin. Millions and millions of pounds worth of drugs. And far too many of the locals involved. Kate was convinced that there were still members of the smuggling ring out there, hiding in plain sight, just hoping that neither Ally nor Adam Robbins was going to name them in the hope of getting a little time shaved off their own sentences.

“Fair point, Jimmy. But I don’t think the people smugglers have discovered the north Norfolk coast today.”

Jimmy seemed a little deflated as she turned up the beach road and slowed down to check for water. Jimmy snickered. “You should’ve got a Range Rover with a snorkel, then you wouldn’t have to worry about a little bit of water, sarge.”

“Salt water is the tool of the devil, Jimmy. You’d do well to remember that.” She’d been told that locally this road was referred to as “Car Killer Lane” because of the way it flooded at high tide. The height of the water was deceptive, and more than a few cars every year were written off as a result. She refused to be another statistic. Again.

“You do know that only part of the road floods, don’t you?”

“Part or all,” she said with a shrug, “it’s all the same to me.” The road was clear, fortunately, and she put her foot down to make the last half mile to the beach car park.

Police tape cordoned off the entrance of the beach. It stretched across the ten-metre-wide expanse of sand from the gates of the

golf course on the right to the concrete slabs on the left. The latter created a barrier, to protect the clubhouse from the tide. There were huge boulders at the base, half-hidden by sand. Tufts of marram grass poked out along the cracks. A short police community support officer—PCSO—stood in front of the tape, bobbing from one foot to the other, hands jammed into his pockets, head hunkered deep down into his collar against the wind.

Kate quickly found a parking space in the almost-empty car park and grabbed her coat from the back seat. “Right, let’s go see what we’ve got then.”

She clicked the lock as she stuffed her keys in her pocket and fastened the zip of her down jacket, immensely glad she’d allowed Gina to talk her into investing in something that offered a little more protection from the elements than her old leather jacket did. The jacket and the thermal leggings Kate wore under her jeans were her biggest concession to a bout of hypothermia that had resulted from her attempting to collect evidence in the Connie Wells case just six weeks ago.

“Bout time you two got here.” The stout, balding figure of Detective Inspector Timmons called to them. “Getting your hair done, were you, lad?” His ruddy face was even redder than normal.

She hoped that was just the wind and not a case of his blood pressure rising because they were late.

“Sorry, sir,” Jimmy mumbled.

Timmons continued to scowl, but Kate thought she saw a twinkle of merriment behind those wily eyes. His usually smart suit was decidedly dishevelled today, and there were wet, sandy patches on his knees that aroused her curiosity even more.

“What do we have, sir?” Kate addressed DI Timmons with a glance over his left shoulder, trying to get a glimpse of the body they were there to see.

“It’s not on the beach. Thankfully. The crime scene techs said we’re fine to go in, so follow me.” He turned away from the clubhouse and

led them about a hundred yards down from the beach entrance and up into the dunes.

Kate saw a thick slab of concrete, sand piled on top of it and on either side, and a small hole underneath it that looked to disappear into the sand. "A tunnel?" she asked.

"Yup. Leads to a bunker that was built during the Second World War. It was the front line of the home defence. If they tried to invade from the North Sea." Timmons pointed to the concrete. "Well, our lads were going to try and blow 'em out of the water from here." He waved his hand up the line of the dunes. "There's a whole network of them up and down the coast. Most of 'em are buried now, and the ones that aren't bloody well should be."

"Why? That's our history. Our heritage, sir," Jimmy said.

"That it may be, lad, but the ones that are still visible are used for nothing more than kids' hangouts. They're full of beer cans, used condoms, and used needles. The walls are covered with graffiti, and they stink of piss and vomit." He knelt down beside the hole. "Not my idea of a heritage to be preserved. Come on." He slunk down onto his belly and disappeared head first into the hole.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Kate sighed. She hated small spaces. She wouldn't go so far as to say she was claustrophobic, but that was more to do with the fact that she hated to admit a weakness than anything else.

"Want me to go first, sarge?" Jimmy offered.

"No, I bloody don't." Kate's sense of competition was stronger than her claustrophobia. Just. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and tied it into a hairband she kept around her wrist. Kneeling at the entrance, she stared into the black hole. "How far is it, sir?"

"Not far. Maybe six feet before you can stand up again." His voice drifted closer. "We've got lights down here, but there's a corner to go round. You'll see it when you start to make your way."

"Right." Kate swallowed and got down on to her belly. She used her elbows and knees to push herself down the incline. It almost felt like she was falling as she shuffled her way down the sand. At one

point she lifted herself too high in her haste to make progress and banged her head on the rough concrete ceiling above her. “Bollocks,” she hissed, and rubbed the tender spot on the back of her head. No lump. Yet.

“Nearly there, Sergeant,” Timmons said, his voice too loud in the darkness.

Everything seemed too loud. Her own breathing, her heartbeat, the scuff and scrape of cloth on sand.

“I’ve got you.” He wrapped a hand around her bicep and helped her to her knees, then her feet, before offering the same help to Jimmy, and leading them from what had obviously been a corridor into a small anteroom.

Huge banks of lights had been brought down in pieces and assembled to illuminate the room. The rough breeze blocks were covered in graffiti, and the debris was exactly as Timmons had described. Except everything was covered in a layer of silt, and the scent of putrefaction and decay was as pervasive as the darkness that the lights were attempting to keep at bay.

“What a place to die,” Dr Anderson said as she examined the body. Well, what was left of it anyway.

“Good to see you again, Ruth,” Kate said as she squatted beside the coroner.

“You too, Kate. You okay? You’re looking a little pale.”

“Not as pale as our friend here.”

Ruth Anderson took the hint and moved on. “Well, he’s got an excuse.”

“Male then?” Kate looked at the remains—no, the bones. In the harsh fluorescent light, they appeared white, and covered in scraps of dirty, half-rotted cloth and mud. The small bones of the feet and hands didn’t appear to be in place, but they could have easily been covered by the silt that squelched beneath her feet.

“Based on the hips, yes, definitely.”

“And it’s definitely human remains, not one of those skeletons you see in biology class?”

“Oh no. This was very definitely a real person.” Ruth’s voice had a distant quality to it. Like she was trying to figure something out that didn’t belong. Other than the skeleton in a bunker.

“What is it? What’s got you all frowny and distant?”

“There are a few inconsistencies.”

“Such as?”

“Well, take a look at the shoes.”

Kate glanced at the feet of the skeleton. Two shoes. One a man’s black loafer, the other what looked to be a fur-lined slipper boot, the same as she’d seen her gran wear when she was in hospital. Both were clearly different sizes, and both for the left foot. Kate looked more closely at the scraps of cloth covering the bones, but they were too dirty to make out any more details.

“I’ll be able to tell you more about the clothes once I get them back to the lab and examine them under better light and with the use of a little clean water, but we also have these.” Ruth held up a set of false teeth. Just the upper plate, but there was a name inside the bridge.

“What the—”

“The dentist puts a label inside the resin before it sets, so that’s in there permanently but it doesn’t affect the wearer in any way,” Ruth supplied. “It’s a practice that’s used a lot in hospitals and care homes.”

“That makes sense.”

“True.”

“So why is our gentleman wearing Annie Balding’s dentures?”

“You’re the detective, Kate. Not me.” Ruth smiled at her with a wink.

“Helpful, thanks,” Kate muttered and continued to stare at the dentures.

“Now, now, don’t get sulky, Kate. At least we’ll be able to reconstruct the face of this victim for you.”

“Uh-huh. Good job, since I don’t see you getting me any prints.”

“True. And DNA isn’t going to be possible either.”

“It won’t?”

“No. Submersion in salt water would cause the DNA to denature after forty-eight to seventy-two hours.”

“But you get DNA from bodies pulled out of the sea all the time.”

“There’s the difference. Bodies, not skeletons. If we still had flesh, I could get you DNA. Skeletal DNA is useless after seventy-two hours. I couldn’t get you a profile from this lot if I had a million years to try.”

“Okay. This is getting better and better. How long has he been here? I’m guessing you can give us a rough guideline to start with.”

“This place was sealed off by a storm on the fifth of December 2013. No one’s been able to get in since then.”

“How do we know he wasn’t in here before then?”

“The rate of decomposition is consistent with a three-year estimate, but until I do some testing, I couldn’t be more exact.”

“Fair enough.” Kate looked up at Timmons. “So why are we down here now? Why’s it open again?”

“The National Trust boffins have decided to open it and do it up so that they can bring kids in here as part of a history trip,” Timmons said. “They were planning to dig it all out fully, put doors back on, and keep it safe and clean for the youngsters.”

“And they’re doing this in the middle of December because...?”

“Low season and it gives them plenty of time to get it ready for the kiddiewinks at Easter.”

“Right. So this was found when they started excavating?”

“Yes. They’ve been working on digging out the tunnel all day yesterday, and found Skeleton Stan just about an hour ago when they broke through and came in to take their first look around.”

“Lovely surprise for them.”

“Indeed.”

Kate turned back to Ruth. “Any idea how he died?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be able to give you more when I get back to the morgue, but without flesh to examine, I may not be able to give you a definitive cause of death. It depends what the bones tell me.”

“Accidental? Suspicious?”

“Possibly.”

“Which one?”

“Either.”

Kate sighed. "Fine."

"Nice try, Brannon," Timmons said. "Until we know differently, we proceed as though this is a murder enquiry. I won't lose vital evidence by sitting around and waiting for the autopsy results if it turns out this is suspicious. If it's not, then maybe we'll at least have identified who the poor sod is in the meantime. I've got another case over in Lynn that needs my attention. You and Stella and the boys can handle this one. Just keep me informed as you go."

"Understood, sir." She turned back to Ruth. "How long before you can get us the facial reconstruction?"

"I'll process the skull as soon as I get back and get it in the scanner. As soon as I send the file to Grimshaw over in tech, he should be able to run it through the computer, and I'd imagine he'd be able to get you an image pretty quickly. Later this afternoon maybe."

Kate smiled. "Thanks." She stood up and turned to Jimmy. "Come on, we'll go and start pulling missing persons from that period and see if we can find stuff to compare that image to once we get it."

Jimmy nodded.

"Good plan, Brannon," Timmons said. "Goodwin, Brothers, and Collier are heading over to Hunstanton again to set up. I've already spoken to Inspector Savage, and they're all expecting you over there. I think someone mentioned something about you bringing coffees. I said you'd stop on your way over."

"Thanks, boss. I appreciate that," she said sarcastically. "Before we go play errand boy, though, I'd like to talk to the people who were digging the tunnel out and found the skeleton."

"Of course. I have them waiting in the snug over at the golf house." He led them out of the room and back to the tunnel. "Bit more civilized than keeping them waiting in this bloody wind. Especially as I didn't know how long Powers' haircut was going to take."

Kate chuckled and followed Timmons up the sand-covered tunnel, pushing and pulling herself up while keeping her head as low as she could. Even though it was physically harder to pull herself out, mentally it was a million times easier.

“Better?” Timmons asked quietly as he gave her a hand to her feet. She nodded and offered him a small smile of gratitude.

“Good. Well done.”

He’d known, and let her do what she needed to maintain her focus while she was down there without making a fuss. She’d asked questions that should really have been his to ask, but he’d let her get on with it and not interjected as she dealt with the situation. Her respect for her boss rose a little more. He might look like a throwback to the eighties with his trench coat and leather driving gloves, but he certainly didn’t act like it. “Thanks.”

“Oh, bloody hell.” Jimmy crawled out of the tunnel rubbing his head. “Fuck me. That hurts.”

“Oh yeah, Jimmy, watch your head on that ceiling, lad,” Timmons offered, then pointed them both back up the beach.

CHAPTER 2

Gina pushed her fingers through her hair and winced when she got her ring tangled in a knot. She had to pull it from her finger before she could untangle the mess and reclaim her ring.

“You okay?” Sarah asked.

Gina looked up to the door of her office. “Yeah, I’m good. Just got my ring stuck in my hair.” She rolled her eyes and then looked back down at the papers strewn across her desk. “Good” was probably not the right word. Overwhelmed. Swamped. Scared. Those were much more appropriate options; good...not so much.

“Look, I’m sorry to have to push, but I kind of need to know where I stand.”

Gina knew what Sarah meant, but she was in no mood to play the subtle guessing games that Sarah had been playing for the past six weeks. Gina was doing her best in extremely difficult circumstances, and quite frankly, Sarah wasn’t doing much to help the situation.

Since Gina’s best friend, Connie, had died without leaving a will, Gina had been doing her best to keep the business afloat so that they had jobs and wages coming in, while still trying to figure out what was going to happen to them all in the long term. Neither of which was easy to do. A tourism business in the dead of winter was always a money drain, and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs information was, well, difficult to get to grips with.

It also meant that Gina’s patience was at an end, and if she were truly honest, if Sarah decided to quit, it would make her life much easier. So she decided to make the young woman spell out her issues. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you’re doing your best to keep the campsite and hostel running, and after everything that’s happened, I think you’re doing an amazing job of it. But I really need to know what’s going on.”

Gina could feel the crease on her forehead deepening as she watched Sarah simper. “I’ve told you everything I know, Sarah. Connie didn’t leave a will. She had no relatives that any one knows of, and she wasn’t married. Her entire estate is now the property of the state.”

“Yes, I know, you’ve told us that. But what does it all actually mean? To us. In practical terms. I mean, will I still have a job and somewhere to live next month? Or are they going to close us down and kick us all out?”

Gina was just as worried as they were. More probably. She had responsibilities they didn’t. She had Sammy to take care of, after all. And trying to get to the bottom of what was going to happen was like trying to find the end of the rainbow. Complex didn’t even begin to cover it.

She half wished it had all gone to Leah, Connie’s junkie ex-girlfriend. At least then they’d know exactly what pile of shit they had to deal with, rather than the uncertainty they were left with right now. She’d even gone so far as to speak to one of her old friends from school who’d gone on to become a solicitor. She was looking into it for her—as a friend—as it wasn’t the kind of law she usually dealt with. Gina hoped “as a friend” meant “no fee required”, because money was becoming thin on the ground.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Sarah. I don’t have those answers right now.”

“And how long will it be before you do?” Sarah folded her arms across her chest.

“In all honesty, I don’t know.”

“Well, that’s not good enough, Gina. We need to know.”

“We?” Gina queried.

“Yeah, me, Emma, and Rick. We need to know what’s going to happen here so we can make plans if we need to.”

More than half her staff were mutinying. *Ungrateful bastards*. “And Will?”

Sarah shrugged. “He said he’d wait. Something about him owing that much to Connie. He’s a bloody fool if you ask me.”

He's a bloody angel if you ask me. “Well, I’m sorry, Sarah, but I can’t tell you any more without making shit up. Which I’ll happily do if you want? I’ve already told you as much as I know of this process. The estate is registered on the Bona Vacantia. People have two years to come forward and try to make a legitimate claim if they think they are entitled to the estate in the absence of a will.”

“How do you know all this shit?”

“It truly is amazing what you can find out on the internet when you go looking. Plus, I have a friend who’s a solicitor. She gave me a few tips.”

“Right. So what happens after two years?”

“Well, if no one has come forward, then the state can do as they wish with it all. In this case, I would presume that would mean selling the business and her house.”

“And in the meantime?”

“I assume I keep running the business as it is.”

“And am I to assume you can do that?” Her response emphasised all the assumptions Gina was having to operate under, and underscoring the fact that she was basically pissing in the wind and hoping to stay dry.

Gina shrugged. It was a question she’d been asking herself for the past month. She’d spent two weeks recovering from her ordeal with Ally Robins—well, the physical side of it anyway—before she’d thrown herself back into work and tried to keep together the business that her best friend had built up. A business that was now ownerless and rudderless in the wake of Connie’s murder and the subsequent vacuum. “I will for as long as I’m able to.”

Sarah nodded and pursed her lips. “I’m sorry, Gina, but that’s just not enough for us.” She held out a small stack of white envelopes. “We need more security than that. We’re not just talking about our jobs after all. We live here as well as work here.”

Gina couldn’t argue with her. She couldn’t blame her...them, apparently. Gina took the envelopes and leafed through them. Sarah, Emma, and Rick. “Notice?” Gina asked, knowing she held their resignations in her hand.

“A week.”

Gina lifted her eyebrows. “Do you all have jobs lined up?”

Sarah nodded. “We wanted to give you a chance to match the offers we have on the table, though.” She shrugged. “You can’t.”

Bitch. “Well, I wish you all the best of luck then.”

Sarah scowled. “What? That’s it? You’re not going to beg us to stay or anything?”

Gina dropped the envelopes into the in tray. “You already told me I couldn’t match the offers you all have on the table, so no. You’ve clearly made up your minds and it’s time for you to move on, so, thank you for all your hard work, and if your new employer needs a reference from me, please give them my e-mail address.”

Sarah’s scowl deepened as she turned on her heels and slammed the door closed behind her.

“B-bye then.” Gina muttered under her breath and opened the booking system on her computer. The hostel was fully booked for the weekend, but fortunately, there were no rooms booked for Sunday night or the rest of the week. Making a quick decision, she blocked the weekdays throughout the winter. With only herself and William left to run the hostel and campsite until she could find some new staff—and money to pay them—that was about as much as they’d be able to manage. It also meant she could turn off the heating during the week to preserve fuel and running costs. Her wages bill was down by three quarters, and suddenly she felt a little bit more optimistic about running the place for the winter. Or at least until the money started to come back in.

She picked up her phone and opened the messaging app. She clicked on the last message Kate had sent her—a simple “What did I do?”—and wondered what it was that was stopping her from responding. No, that wasn’t true. She knew what was stopping her, she just didn’t know when she was going to get past it and get back to being Gina again. She closed the app and used the phone to set an alarm instead—2.45 p.m. should give her plenty of time to get to the school to pick up Sammy. Now she had paperwork to deal with.

CHAPTER 3

The clubhouse stood at the entrance to Brancaster beach like a sentry towering over the sands. The two-storey structure looked like a large house with a sprawling collection of buildings behind it, and huge picture windows in an upstairs balcony. Almost like it was upside down.

Kate and Jimmy were greeted at oversized double doors by a tall gentleman with a shock of dark hair, a firm handshake, and a warm smile.

“Edgar Spink, club secretary. Terrible business all this. Terrible.”

“It is. Detective Sergeant Kate Brannon and Detective Constable Jimmy Powers. Pleased to meet you,” Kate said and followed him into a hallway covered in dark wood panelling, polished until she could see her face in it. “Detective Inspector Timmons said there were some folks here from the National Trust.”

“Yes, yes, of course. This way, please.” He led them into a large social room—again covered in dark wood, highly polished—where the scent of coffee and brandy hung in the air.

It was exactly how she’d always pictured a “gentleman’s smoking room”. Testosterone and machismo had carved every bold line, painted egos upon plaques, and etched names into glass for prosperity. She couldn’t imagine how out of place she must look. She glanced over and saw another woman sitting with two younger men. *Ah. That out of place.*

Kate introduced herself and Jimmy as the woman stood and shook Kate’s hand.

“Jo Herd, I’m the manager of the National Trust Brandale Centre.” She flicked curly blond hair over a painfully thin shoulder and smiled insipidly.

“So you’re the supervisor on this project?” Kate asked.

“Yes. Danny and Steve are two volunteers from our inner city outreach programme. They were doing the actual digging and found... *the remains.*” She whispered the last two words.

“Have you been into the bunker today, Ms Herd?”

She shook her head. “Heavens, no. It must be just awful down there.”

Kate nodded. “I’m sure, but I’m afraid it’s Danny and Steve that we need to talk to right now.”

“Of course, of course. I’m here to support them.”

Kate caught the stockier of the two rolling his eyes behind Jo Herd’s back and smothered a chuckle. “I’m sure they appreciate that as much as I do, but we have to get official statements from them. Are either of them under the age of eighteen?”

“No, no, of course—”

“Are either of them impaired in any way and need a guardian to protect them in a situation like this?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“Okay, then I’m afraid I must ask you to let me speak to them alone. I can do that here or at the station, but I do need to get their official statements.”

Ms Herd’s lips tightened and the top one disappeared between her teeth. Her eyes pulled into slits as she stared hard at Kate.

Kate didn’t flinch.

“Of course. Anything I can do to help.”

“Thank you.” Kate moved past her to the table with the two young men and introduced herself again.

“Steve Nicholls, he’s Danny Batty,” the stocky eye-roller said.

“Nice to meet you both. Are you okay? Must have been quite a shock for you.”

“Well, yeah. But it was just bones, like. It’s not like it was totally gross or anything.”

With his cocky grin, his hand tucked down the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms, and his baseball cap turned so that the peak was stuck over one ear, she could practically see him swaggering down the street with his arse hanging out the back of his pants. Danny didn’t

seem quite as unfazed as his friend. He sat with his arms folded across his chest like a shield, and his chin tucked into the neck of his hoodie like he was trying to hide.

“What about you, Danny? Are you okay? We can get you someone to talk to if you think it’ll help you.”

Danny shrugged and slunk lower in his chair, his head almost disappearing inside his hoodie. “I’m good.”

Yeah, right. “Okay, so why don’t you tell me what happened.”

Steve sat up straight in his chair and started gesticulating wildly with his hands. “We were diggin’ out the sand like we was supposed to. Just diggin’ and diggin’. We put the sand on this, like, tray to pull it out of the tunnel. I was pulling ’cos I’ve got these guns. And Danny boy, well, he’s skinny as, so he was doing the diggin’.”

“I get the picture. So what happened next?”

“Well, Danny finally managed to unblock the tunnel and then he just went, like, silent as the grave.” He started laughing at his own joke. “Get it?”

“Yes,” Kate answered without so much as a smile, and turned to Danny. “What did you see?”

He tucked his hands into his pockets. “You’ve seen it. You know what I saw.”

“I did, but, you saw it first, Danny. I need to see what you saw.”

“I saw a dead man.”

She leaned forward, rested her elbows on the table, and spoke quietly. “How did you see him?”

“I had a head torch on. So I could see and keep my hands clear. At first I thought there was someone down there with me. Wearing a mask or something. Trying to scare me. I could only see a bit at first. Like out of the corner of my eye. Fucking freaky.”

Kate smiled reassuringly. “I’m sure it was. When you saw it, did you touch it?”

Danny shook his head but cast a quick glance at Steve. “Nah, I didn’t.”

She looked at Steve. “Did you?”

Steve shrugged. "I might have accidentally knocked into something when I was down there."

She blew out through her nose. "You're not in any trouble. I just need to know what you saw and did in there. Did you move anything, accidentally or not, I don't care. I just need to know."

Steve stared at her.

"Did you?"

"He did." Danny said quietly. "He picked up one of the arm bones, but he put it back exactly where it came from and we didn't touch nothing else. We crawled out of there and called you. Well, the police. You know."

"Thank you, Danny. After you crawled out, did either of you go back in, or did anyone else go in before the police arrived?"

Steve stared into space and Danny fidgeted his legs. Opening and closing his knees like he was dancing to a beat in his head. "The man from the golf course tried to, but the plastic policeman arrived and stopped him."

"Which one?"

"I don't know which copper it was. Little and dumpy. He's stood at the tape now."

"No, I meant which man from the golf course?"

"Oh, erm, the tall one with the limp."

Kate looked quickly at Jimmy and caught the tiny shrug. "Thanks, that's a big help." She pushed her card across the table. "If you think of anything else or you just want to talk, call me."

Danny picked up the card.

"Okay?"

He nodded and stuffed the card into his pocket. "Thanks."

She stood up and followed Jimmy away from the table.

"Mr Spink didn't mention anyone else out there today. Nor did Timmons," Jimmy said.

"Nope. But more to the point, why didn't the plastic policeman tell us when we got here either? Danny said he was talking to him."

“You shouldn’t call the PCSO’s that. The police community support officers are a vital part of our team, sarge,” Jimmy said.

She shrugged, wondering how he managed to keep a straight face when he came out with bull like that. “Then they should do their jobs properly and I wouldn’t have cause to.” She spotted a door at the end of the hall with “Club Secretary” stencilled on the dark wood in gold lettering. “I’ll speak to Dumpy later. Right now, let’s see what he’s got to say about it.”

She knocked on the door and opened it when the voice called, “Come in.”

“Mr Spink, do you have a staff member on shift today with a limp?”

He frowned slightly. “Well, yes. That would be Malcolm, the head groundskeeper here.”

“Would it be possible for us to have a quick word with him?”

“Of course. I’m not sure where he’ll be at the moment, but I’ll just give him a call.” He indicated the pair of chairs opposite his desk.

“Thanks,” Kate said as she and Jimmy sat down, and waited for Mr Spink to make his call.

The room was bright and airy, not at all like the rest of the building they’d seen so far. The computer perched on the desk looked several years old but still perfectly serviceable. Files were neat and orderly, and the old wooden filing cabinet with tiny drawers for stacks of index cards was again so highly polished that she could see the shed and parked cars outside the window in it.

“Malcolm? There are detectives here and they would like to talk to you,” Mr Spink said down the phone. “I don’t know. Where are you?”

Kate could imagine the other side of the conversation easily enough.

“No, no. It’ll be faster for me to bring them over to you.” He hung up and smiled. “He’s over at the tractor shed. If you wouldn’t mind a quick ride, I’ll take you over there.”

“I’d appreciate it very much. Thank you.” Kate smiled, and they followed him out of the room.

The ride turned out to be a golf cart that Mr Spink drove them across the golf course in. There wasn’t a single person about, and the only sound was the small engine of the buggy.

Kate glanced out towards the sea and wondered what it would be like on any given day. Would you be able to hear hoards of tourists just the other side of the dunes during the season? Or was it only ever the roar of the tide that detracted from the silence? Or perhaps the call of the birds? “Is it always this quiet?”

He shook his head. “Yes and no. Even when there are people on the course it’s the thing I love most about this place. The quiet.” He glanced at her. “I’ve worked at a number of different golf courses over my career, Detective. But this is the only one where I can stand on the course and hear nothing but the wind and the sea.”

“What do you normally hear on a golf course?”

He smiled sadly. “Traffic, mostly.”

“Ah.” She looked across the well-tended lawns and swathes of rough sod to bunkers, which had been cut into the grass and held back by sawn and weathered railway sleepers. Flags of red and yellow fluttered in the breeze as they zipped by, and birds cried overhead.

When he pulled off the fairway and turned behind what looked to be another mound on the course, Kate was surprised to see a large plant works. The tractor shed was a huge building of corrugated steel, painted a deep green so that it was more difficult to see against the grass. A man in his late fifties stood outside with a cigarette rolled between thin lips. A dark woollen cap covered his head and shaded his eyes as he walked towards them with a pronounced limp.

“Malcolm Slater.” He held out his hand, and Kate quickly introduced them. She waited until Mr Spink moved away.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Kate asked, indicating his leg.

“In a manner of speaking, miss.” He cocked his leg to the side as he bent forward and knocked on it. It sounded hollow. “I can take it off if you like.”

Kate waved her hand. “No, not at all. I take it isn’t a recent injury?”

“Nah. Been like this for thirty years now. More, in fact. Army.”

“Ah,” Kate said.

“Iraq?” Jimmy asked.

Kate and Malcolm both stared at him.

“Iraq?” Malcolm asked.

Jimmy shrugged a little sheepishly.

“History’s not your strong suit, is it, lad?”

“Sorry.” Jimmy had the good grace to look ashamed.

“Northern Ireland, son.”

“Oh, right.”

“Yeah, stood on something I shouldn’t of, and got myself discharged right quick for me troubles. I’ve worked here ever since. But that’s not what you want to hear about today, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Kate agreed. “Why were you trying to get down into the bunker this morning?”

“I needed to know if it was true or if those young lads were playing a dirty, rotten trick on us.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I thought I was the last person alive in that bunker before it got shut off from the world.”

Kate cleared her throat. “Can you explain that please?”

He nodded his head solemnly. “December fifth, 2013.”

“The night of the flood,” Jimmy said.

“Aye. Hell of a night.” He paused, seemingly waiting for an acknowledgment.

“That it was,” Kate said, trying to urge him to continue.

“You were here?”

She shook her head. “No, I was working in Norwich then. They sent me over to Cromer that night. I’ve never seen anything like it. Houses were just crumbling into the sea.”

Malcolm nodded. “Well, we didn’t lose any houses that way, but by God did we get some flooding. We were prepared, of course. The weather idiots were all over it, warning us of the perfect storm that was heading our way.”

“The perfect storm?” Jimmy asked.

“Are you not local, lad?”

Kate knew it rankled when strangers, and perpetrators, saw Jimmy’s boyish looks as a way to poke and prod. But he often used it

to get witnesses to open up to him. It made him far more approachable than many of her colleagues, and sometimes people open up when they think you're on their side. No matter what they've done.

"I was away at the time of the flood. Working in London."

"Ah. Well, you don't know then. The perfect storm was a high spring tide, highest in a decade, and a wind storm out at sea. They all combined to make the tide so high that it breached all the flood defences up and down the coast."

"But no one was hurt. No one died in the floods."

"True. We were well warned and we evacuated. Went around checking everything to make sure there was no one left that could be hurt." He pointed out towards the dunes. "You know all those boulders out there?"

Jimmy nodded.

"They're all new. The water picked up the old ones and took 'em away. Same size as those—bigger, some of 'em. And the water just took 'em away like Lego bricks. The dunes were washed away. Every house on this side of the main road suffered flood damage to some extent or another. Every one."

"I'm sorry," Jimmy offered.

Malcolm waved his hand. "Not your fault, lad. Mother Nature can be a bitch when she's in the mood." He offered a weak smile. "So, anyway, we knew what time the road was going to flood, we knew that the chances were this building was going to flood, and that the golf course was going to spend a considerable amount of time under water. So we checked everything. Work sheds, the outhouses, the wheelie bins, and yes, I even checked in that bloody bunker. I didn't want the death of a kid on my conscience just because it was a ball ache for me to get myself down that half-buried tunnel."

"And what did you find down there?" Kate asked. The wind kicked up, tossing her hair over her shoulder and into her eyes. She brushed it back and tucked it into the collar of her coat.

"A load of half-rusted cans and some used johnnies."

Kate nodded. "A local hangout for the kids?"

“Something like that. Anyway, there was no one down there, except maybe the odd rat or two. There was no one, living or dead, in that bunker when I left it.”

“And what time was that? Do you have any idea?”

“We had to be clear of the road by five, and it was the last place I checked.”

“And there was no one on the road when you drove away?”

“No. The roads were empty.”

“Anyone on foot?”

“No one I could see. The water was literally coming up the road behind me.”

Jimmy smiled. “You make it sound like one of those films where there’s a tsunami chasing you down or something.”

Malcolm laughed. “Nothing so dramatic as that here in Norfolk, lad. But I can tell you that no one would have made it down the road within ten minutes of me coming up it. Not in a car anyway, and there was no one passing me as I left. So, at five o’clock, it was empty. By the time we came back in the morning to assess the damage, the bunker was sealed and has been until this morning.”

“Why was it never opened before now?” she asked. A seagull squawked as it hunted the shoreline. Kate was glad she had nothing in her hands. The thieving birds were known to steal anything they could get their beaks around. Even from the hands of the unsuspecting.

Malcolm shrugged. “The beach is managed by the National Trust, not us. So it was up to them what happened to it. You’ll have to ask them why they left it till now.”

“If it was theirs to manage, why did you check it that night?”

“Like I said, I had to. I knew that local kids went in there, drinking, shag—excuse me—fooling around, and whatnot. While the adults were all preoccupied with the flood preparations, I wouldn’t have put it past some of the little blighters to go sneaking in there for a bit of fun, not realising it was dangerous.” He sighed. “I couldn’t have lived with it if I’d had the thought, not bothered checking just because it was someone else’s job to do, and then a kid turned up missing or dead.”

Kate smiled. "I understand."

"Happened anyway, though didn't it?" He plucked a strand of tobacco from the tip of his tongue and spat out in an attempt to rid his mouth of the foul taste and debris.

Kate didn't think it was really the tobacco that was offensive to him. The taste of failure was always so much worse.

"You did your best, Malcolm. It was clear when you had to leave to keep yourself safe. That's all you could do. It's all anyone can do."

"Wasn't enough for that poor bugger, though." He shoved his hand under his hat and scratched at his scalp.

Kate noticed the red tinge to his fingernails before he crossed his arms over his chest.

"What did you do for the rest of the night?"

"Night of the flood?" Malcolm clarified.

"Yes."

"I spent most of it with some of the village locals. It was the weekend of the Christmas Market over by the campsite. The marquees were already out and we were hoping and praying that the water wouldn't come up so far as to ruin everything for the weekend."

"Why did they not cancel if the weather was so bad?" Jimmy asked.

"Bloody Sands. Thinks he can hold back the bloody tide with a flick of his wrist."

"Edward?" Kate asked.

"No, the son. Rupert. The Christmas Market's his baby. Big money-spinner for all the shops in the area, so it increases his revenue."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," Kate said.

"The Sands own the buildings that the shops operate out of and that the market stalls sit on. They pay a base rent of, say, fifteen grand a year, more in some cases, depends on the size of the property, but they also have to pay a premium on top of that. Fifteen per cent of turnover on top of the base rent. So the more each shop and stall makes every year, the more he lines his pockets."

Jimmy whistled. "That's a pretty nice earner."

"Isn't it, lad. Extortion at half the price."

“How do you know about this deal?” Kate asked.

There was a harsh clanging from inside the shed and the doors slid open. A small earth mover trundled out with a figure wrapped up so much that Kate couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman at the wheel.

Malcolm lifted his hand to acknowledge the driver as they passed and waited for the noise to dissipate before he spoke.

“My wife used to run the bike hire out of the old forge on the farm. Robbing bastards drove her to bankruptcy. We nearly lost the bloody house. She had a breakdown. Spent three years popping pills because of those robbing gits.”

“I see. I'm sorry to hear about that, Malcolm.” Kate stuck her hands in her pocket. “Who's your wife?”

“Pam Slater. She works behind the bar at the Jolly now. Helen and her go way back. Schoolkids together, you know how it is. Anyway, Helen said she couldn't see us struggling, and took her on in the summer. She works in the kitchen.”

“Was she with you that night?”

“She came down to the front line—that's what we called it at the campsite—after she finished work. She finished her shift at nine, but there were lots of other people there. All the staff from the campsite, Connie, even Leah was there that night. We were all stood on the white line in the middle of the road, arms linked like we were a bloody barrier ourselves. Just willing the water to stop rising.”

“Did it?” Jimmy asked.

“At me toes, lad.” Malcolm smiled. “At me toes.” He put his hands in his pocket and pulled out a packet of tobacco.

The wind carried the damp, pungent smell to Kate's nose. It was one that still reminded her of her father. It was almost thirty years since he'd died, but she could still see him sat at her gran's kitchen table, rolling a ciggie, and doing everything he could not to look at her. For some reason it was the scent of the fresh tobacco that reminded her of him rather than the acrid odour of smoke. Probably because her gran made him light up outside. She shook her head and focused on Malcolm again. “Do you have any idea who it could've been? Was there anyone in particular you knew went in there?”

He shook his head. “Like I said, only the kids messing about, and none of them ever turned up missing or anything like that, so...” He stuck the roll-up between his lips and held a lighter to the tip before dragging a deep breath through the poisonous little stick. “Anything else you need from me?”

Kate shook her head and handed him her card. “No, thanks for all your help, Malcolm. If you think of anything else, please give me a call.”

“Will do.” He flicked ash from the tip of the cigarette and limped away.

“So we’ve got nothing useful,” Jimmy said.

“Au contraire, *mon ami*. We know when our victim died—the fifth of December 2013 after 5 p.m.—and we know he’s a bloke, who had no teeth of his own.”

Jimmy chuckled. “My mistake, sarge. Open-and-shut this one, then.”

“No need for that level of sarcasm, Jimmy,” Kate said as they climbed back into the golf cart and allowed Mr Spink to drive them back to the clubhouse.

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UNDER PARR

BY ANDREA BRAMHALL

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