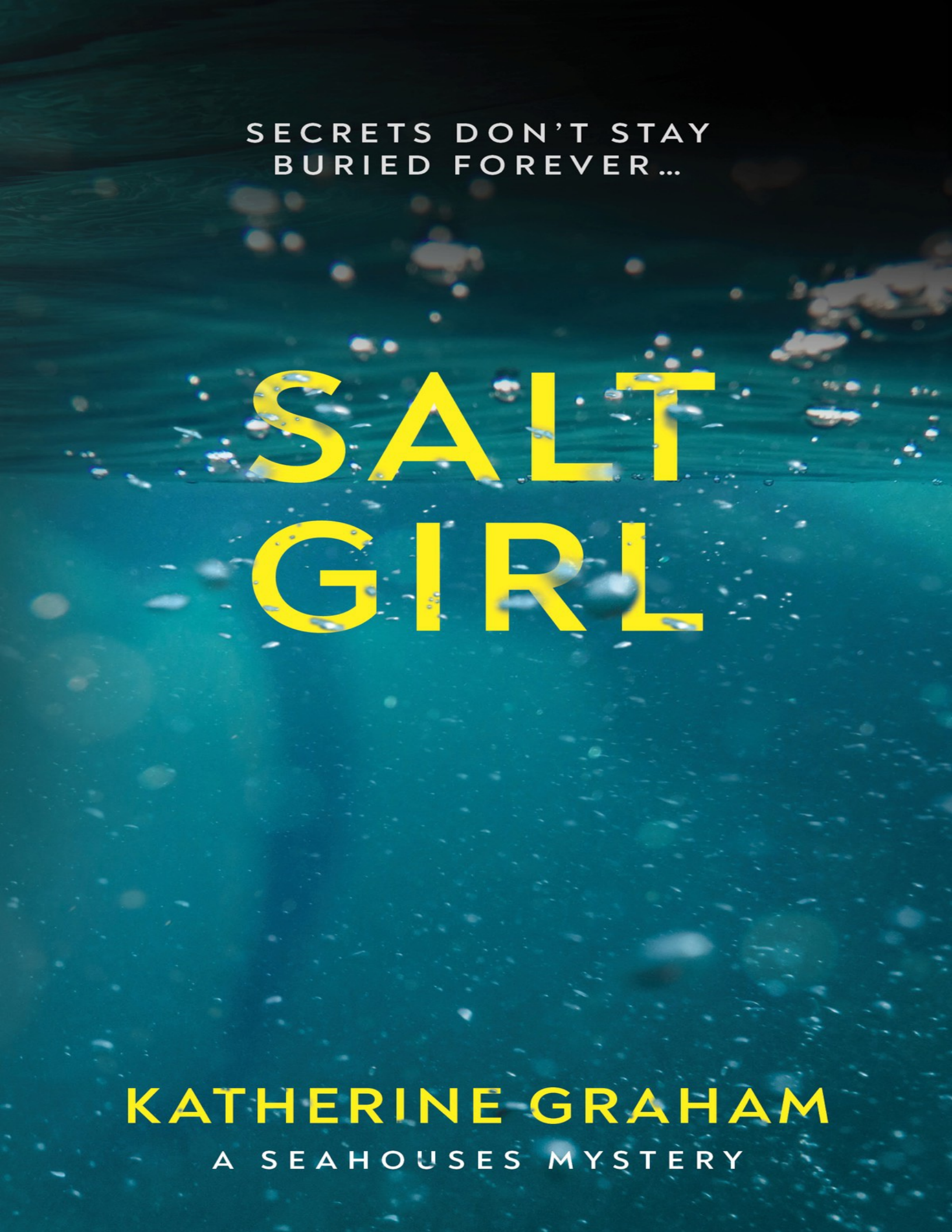

SECRETS DON'T STAY
BURIED FOREVER...
SALT
GIRL
KATHERINE GRAHAM
A SEAHOUSES MYSTERY

SALT GIRL

SEAHOUSES MYSTERY

KATHERINE GRAHAM



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For all the teachers

PROLOGUE

Then

The night is quiet. *Deathly still.*

Those words come to me – it must be a line from a poem, or perhaps the lyrics of a song – and I instantly regret them, pushing them from my mind. I force myself to think happier thoughts. *Positive mental attitude.* That's what I need right now. Positivity.

The gravel crunches under my feet. I tread as lightly as I can, even if it slows my pace. In the empty silence of the night, my heart is hammering.

The last bus left a couple of hours ago. The timetable is folded up in my pocket, even though I know it by heart.

I was supposed to be on that bus. No worries. I always have a plan B.

I'm out. *I'm getting away.* That's all that matters.

Hitchhiking is not ideal, but I've been mentally preparing myself just in case it came down to this. I'll have to take my chances. There's no other choice.

I'd hoped to leave earlier. Typical that on tonight of all nights, they were glued to some stupid old film. The music from the closing credits floated up the stairs while I watched the clock, picking at a cuticle until it bled.

I was forced to bide my time, listening until the tread on the stairs had faded, until I'd heard the flick of the light switch and the creak of the bed, then waited another half hour for good measure. No one heard me leave. I'm good at going unnoticed. Let's face it – I've had plenty of practice.

It's cold out here. It's already March, but winter has yet to release its icy grip. My breath mists in front of my face as the chill begins to bite. I pull my scarf tighter around my neck.

There are late trains from Alnmouth and Morpeth. In my head, I repeat the timetable I've spent weeks learning by rote. I could even sleep in the station and wait for the morning train. That's OK. I can do that. There's a fleece and a couple of cereal bars in my backpack. I like to think I'm well prepared.

You can't hear the sea from here. I'm on the path that runs between the houses, a cut dissecting two rows of back gardens. There's barely even a breeze, but the air carries the scent of a log fire and I find it comforting, reassuring. It's a homely smell.

I don't know why I think that. I've never lived anywhere with a real fire.

The windows of the houses are lit up. Little squares, like an advent calendar. Some people haven't closed their curtains. They don't expect anyone to be out here, not at this time of night. It's why I chose to come this way. Besides, why would they worry about someone seeing inside?

It’s not like they have anything to hide.

I got out.

I need to get to Newcastle. This time, I'll tell Dawn the whole story. Once she knows the truth, she’ll cover for me. Not like before.

That’s if anyone even comes for me.

It’s only two months until my eighteenth birthday. I’m hardly worth the effort now. If I ever was.

His words replay in my mind; a scratched record. *You can’t leave me.* I mute his voice.

The light from the windows doesn’t reach the path. The gardens are blanketed in darkness. Shadows pool in the corners, swirl at my feet. I don’t even have the light of the moon to guide me – it’s a sliver of silver, hidden behind a veil of cloud.

It’s fine. I know where I’m going.

Dawn is going to be livid. Like, nuclear explosion-level furious. But we’ll get through it. We’ve been through much worse, me and Dawn.

The thought of her makes me want to cry. I won’t, though. I need to stay level-headed. There’ll be plenty of time for tears later. Right now, I’m in survival mode. *Fight or flight.* I chose flight.

Besides, there’s no fight left in me. I just need to get away from this whole mess.

And what a mess I’ve made.

Against the darkness, I hear a noise. I freeze, holding my breath.

But there’s nothing; only the thundering of my pulse in my ears. It’s just me, spooking myself. I exhale, long and slow. Willing myself calm.

From here, I can see where the cut ends, the point at which it meets the street. There’s a lamppost, the orange glow casting long shadows onto the road. I focus on that streetlamp. It’s not too far away, and from there it’s only a short walk to the middle of the village. The arcade, the pubs. People.

I’ll flag a car down, ask for a ride. I have a whole story worked out. I’m going to tell them I’m a student at Newcastle University. I came to Seahouses for a weekend with my boyfriend, but we had a row and now I need to get home. Everyone always says I look older than I am. Anyway, it’s dark, and people who give lifts to strangers at night presumably don’t ask too many questions.

I hear something. Definitely something this time. I scan the path behind me, the way I’ve just come from. There’s nothing but blackness.

What was it? A bird? An animal?

A person?

It can’t be. There can’t be anyone out here at this hour. Not anyone creeping around, at least. Except me.

My phone is in the side pocket of my bag. I could get it out, but it would cost me precious seconds. Besides, there’s no one to call. I’m on my own.

I pick up speed. *Just keep going. Almost there, now.*

There’s a sharp whack to my shin – it comes out of nowhere, and the shock delays the pain. It takes a second to hit, but when it does, it’s excruciating.

It feels like another entire second before I realise I’m falling, tumbling forwards. Slow motion.

My hands hit the gravel first, my palms searing in agony. My scarf falls off, my backpack slides from my shoulder and lands beside me with a thud. Did I trip on something?

I was tripped.

I've been caught.

I know it before my brain can process the urgent need to scramble back to standing; I know it before I've even righted myself on the ground. My attacker has not yet stepped out of the shadows, but I already know who it is.

I didn't make it. I didn't get away, after all.

I don't even make it to my feet. Then there are hands around my neck; I claw at them, desperately. I can't breathe. They tighten, pressing against my throat with a sickening urgency.

I can't breathe.

The gravel is sharp beneath my knees as I drop again. My arms flail, purposelessly, pathetically, grasping at the night. Something kicks in, adrenaline or instinct. I try to prise the hands off my neck, fighting with every remaining atom of strength, but they're squeezing.

The fight is being squeezed from me.

I'm so tired of fighting. I've been fighting my entire life.

Why didn't I wait until tomorrow morning? Or next week? I could have taken the bus to school and simply vanished, slipped away in plain sight.

I wish I had screamed for help just seconds earlier. I wish I'd punched or kicked. I should have run for my life while I had the chance.

It's too late now.

To run. For my life.

Our eyes meet and I see pure hatred and, beneath that, something more fragile. Something maniacal and – even more frightening – a frantic and despairing hopelessness.

There's no hope for me, either.

The world is spinning. Black spots cloud my vision, the darkness seeping inside me. The last traces of air, of life, are being squeezed from my body. I'm fading.

This is it.

Will anyone miss me? Will anyone even notice I'm gone?

I'm afraid of what comes next, of what awaits me on the other side, that eternal unknown. Infinity. But the fear doesn't have long to take hold, to tighten its icy grip on my consciousness. My conscience.

The last of my light fades, and there's nothing but the darkness, swallowing me whole.

1

Now

IZZY WATCHED AS FINN BROUGHT THE SLEDGEHAMMER DOWN. THE CONCRETE CRACKED ON THE first blow; the noise sent a shudder through her.

She leaned against the doorframe. ‘Coffee?’

He glanced up, noticing her. His face was streaked in dirt, sweat. ‘I’d love one, please.’

She slipped her flip flops off, allowing the cool of the kitchen tiles to soothe the soles of her bare feet, and snapped a capsule into the machine. He’d need water, too. It was thirsty work and today was one of the hottest days of the year so far.

These tiles, they would be next. Who chose brown for a kitchen, anyway? Then the bathroom. And then the master bedroom, and the kids’ rooms, and the living room. The garden. She mentally ticked through the renovation projects in her mind.

The conservatory had nudged its way to the top of her list after a storm three weeks ago. Izzy had woken in the middle of the night with a start, the dregs of a nightmare clinging to her. Reeds around her ankles, threatening to pull her down.

A crash. For one horrible moment, she wasn’t sure what was real and what wasn’t. Her mind raced with potential catastrophes: the children. *Amy.* Those terrifying seconds stretched on, reality suspended between this world and the next.

But the noise. That had been real.

They’d seen the evidence for themselves in the morning. The roof of the conservatory had almost blown clean off and the west-facing window had collapsed inwards. They tore the structure down, only to discover an uneven foundation that would have to be replaced before rebuilding could begin. Izzy had wanted to cry. It was just one more thing on top of all the other things.

Hilariously, Jake thought they could tackle it themselves. He’d convinced himself after watching a couple of videos on YouTube and had even gone as far as buying a sledgehammer. Izzy had tactfully suggested that one of the labourers she worked with needed the money.

At the thought of Jake, she fingered her engagement ring. Even after three months, it still felt too big, too clunky. A weight she couldn’t quite get used to. She blushed whenever strangers’ eyes rested on it and had taken to hiding her hands in her pockets.

She took the coffees outside and handed one to Finn. Further cracks had appeared in the concrete now. Even the most solid things can be destroyed if you know the weak spots.

He took a sip of coffee and wiped his brow with the back of his forearm. ‘I saw the plans for the new conservatory. It’ll look canny once it’s finished.’

She resisted the temptation to correct him. They weren't getting a new conservatory; it was an *orangery*. 'Maybe that storm did us a favour, after all?' The coffee was too hot, scalding her tongue.

Finn set his mug on the ground and picked up one of the smaller chunks of concrete, the muscles in his arms growing taut with the effort. They'd managed to wedge a skip into the cut at the bottom of the garden, and now it was almost full. Shards of PVC, Perspex, and plasterboard stuck out at ugly angles.

Izzy shifted her weight from foot to foot. Should she be helping? Finn had worked for her on a couple of projects, those interior design commissions that called for a little more muscle than she could muster. She tried to think of something useful to do.

The water. She'd forgotten his water.

She padded back into the kitchen and ran the tap, enjoying the kiss of the cool water on her hands. There were emails to be sent, invoices to be filed, and she needed to finish the proposal for the Fletcher property. The kids were staying with them this weekend. She had to order groceries, plan meals, coordinate with Jake about what they would do to keep them entertained. Tasks, demands, *things* piled up in her mind. Life had been so much simpler when it was just her.

Finn had hauled more pieces of concrete to the skip. The ground was emerging where the conservatory used to be, its foundations now reduced to boulders. Pebbles.

Everything could wait.

She sank into a chair, one of six around a faded wooden table on the deck. This would also be replaced, eventually. But with what? Her sketch book was full of doodles, unfinished drawings of incomplete ideas.

She looked up at the house. *Their house*. Grey stone, two-storey, four bedrooms and three reception rooms. A steal, until you costed up the amount of work that it needed. But that's what Izzy had wanted. Wasn't it? An opportunity to show off her skills as an interior designer. A blank canvas, something she and Jake could put their stamp on. A home they would create together, just for them. If only she could figure out where to begin.

The sky was cornflower blue, cloudless. She closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on her face.

Three months since they had bought the place; three months since Jake had gone down on bended knee and asked the question she instantly knew the answer to. So why her hesitation now?

It wasn't him. It was *here*. The village she had yearned to leave, yet it had pulled her back. She was a fish snagged in a net. Seahouses had been the last place on earth she'd thought she'd put down roots, if she ever did.

Finn was clearing the ground with a shovel now, filling the wheelbarrow with smaller pieces of concrete. The patch of sweat on his back darkened, a V blooming in the heat. He probably would have taken his t-shirt off had she not been there. Effortlessly, he steered the wheelbarrow down the path to the bottom of the garden.

Izzy adjusted her thoughts. Mindfulness, that's what it was called. Instagram was full of it these days, not to mention her mother. Wheelbarrow half-full, rather than half-empty. See? It was just a question of perspective. But busy was good. Busy filled the days. Busy kept her mind from wandering, occupying the space that might otherwise fill with doubts…

In the distance, she heard the latch of the front door.

Jake.

‘Out here,’ she called.

He appeared at the doorway, blinking in the bright sunshine. No court today, which meant jeans and a cotton shirt, now folded back on his forearms in acknowledgement of the great weather. It had taken a lot to coax him out of the tweeds he was so fond of wearing when they first met. His mahogany hair, streaked with grey, gleamed in the sunlight. And those arms… She caught a glimpse of the soft down that ran in a ridge to his wrist, and her stomach twisted.

He smiled at her, creases appearing at his eyes. That grin he kept just for her. ‘Looks great,’ he said, without taking his eyes off Izzy.

‘Guys…’ Finn interrupted, shattering their moment. ‘There’s something here…’ There was a question in his voice, unsteady, wavering. Uncertain. His brow knotted in a frown, his hairline sodden from the exertion. She really should have given him more water.

Izzy walked over to Finn’s side, peering into the shallow trough he had excavated. ‘Looks like a ball.’

But she could already see a hole. *That was all right*, she told herself, even as her heart fluttered. An old football with an egg-sized hole in it. Nothing more.

She took a steadying breath.

Jake crouched down for a closer look. ‘Pass me that trowel, would you?’ He didn’t look at Izzy this time.

He gently scraped back the earth, revealing more of the ball. There was a second hole, mirroring the first. Izzy’s stomach knotted.

‘Is that…?’ But Finn didn’t finish his question. He doubled over, dry heaving.

She could see hair now. A football with two holes and hair.

Jake exchanged a glance with Izzy, a frown etched on his face. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

‘Darling,’ he said, doing his best to keep his voice steady. ‘I think you’d better call the police.’

Izzy dialled 999, her hand shaking. From the garden, she could hear the muted discussion between Jake and Finn. She told herself it was better to wait in here, by the front door, ready for when the cavalry arrived. Inside the house it was cool, but her skin was clammy, sheened in sweat. Panic rose in her chest. She fought to keep it down.

She sighed in relief when the knock at the door finally came. It was a familiar face on her doorstep, and Izzy watched as Detective Inspector Pamela Bell registered the connection, the detective’s expression softening as she eventually remembered how she knew the woman in front of her.

It had been two years since Izzy’s sister died, but there were moments – like this – that dredged the memories back to the surface and opened the wound afresh. A scar, never to heal.

‘Izzy Morton. Good to see you again.’ Bell’s voice was flat. ‘You told the dispatcher you’d found something in the garden?’

The lines in the detective’s face had deepened, but her eyes were just as bright, as piercingly inquisitive, as Izzy remembered. At her side stood a younger male detective, freshly shaven and clean-cut. A guy who might have been Izzy’s type, a decade ago, with broad shoulders and a crisp white shirt. He peered over Izzy’s shoulder into the house, seemingly eager to get started. Wordlessly, Izzy waved them inside.

‘We’re doing work on the place; you’ll have to excuse the mess.’ She instantly chastised

herself. As if the partially-stripped walls and bare floors would bother anyone when they had just unearthed a skull in the back garden.

Possibly a skull. Izzy forced herself to keep an open mind, as much as she could.

'This is Finn Hanlon, our builder, and you already know Jake Ridley.' She didn't introduce him as her fiancé and wondered if Jake would be irked.

'Jake, of course. Hi.' DI Bell's tone was cool, but Izzy heard the familiarity.

The law enforcement and legal community in this corner of the country was small and consequently tight-knit, with frequently blurred lines between correct and proper procedure and the personal connections that facilitated shortcuts. As the partner of a local solicitor's firm, Jake had regular dealings with the police, but Izzy had never dared to question if he ever ran into the detective who worked on Amy's case.

They'd covered the hole with a tarpaulin, and Izzy was grateful she didn't have to see the football again and wonder what it might be.

Who it might be.

Jake dragged a hand through his hair. 'We did the best we could.' He looked as if he might throw up. 'As soon as I realised what it was – what it *might* be – we stepped back and did our best to preserve the scene. Hopefully, there's not too much contamination.'

DI Bell nodded towards Finn, who was still unsettlingly pale. 'I take it you found it?'

'Yeah, I suppose. Although I couldn't tell what it was, at first.'

'We were all here,' added Jake. He gestured to Izzy. 'My fiancée and I, we were present when it was found.'

Izzy purposefully avoided the detective's glance, her hands fixed behind her back.

The sun was high. Midday or thereabouts. Izzy thought back to that morning, when Jake had mentioned he might come home at lunch and work from here this afternoon. She couldn't understand how he could concentrate, how he could focus on cases and legal procedure among all the mess.

Lunch. She hadn't even thought about eating. Anyway, she'd lost her appetite now.

'Let's have a look, shall we?' DI Bell draped her blazer over one of the chairs. 'Step back, please.'

Izzy averted her eyes as the young police officer pulled back the tarpaulin. 'Jesus,' he muttered under his breath.

'All right, Rich. Let's radio it in.'

Jake's hand on Izzy's waist made her jump. 'Are you feeling OK? Do you want to come and sit down?'

Izzy shook her head. Her mouth was dry. A radio crackled to life, and she tried to tune out the words. *Human remains. Burial site. Crime scene.*

DI Bell folded back the cuffs of her shirt sleeves. All business, now. 'Forensics will be here soon. In the meantime, DC Denton and I need a few more details from you. Shall we go indoors?'

Izzy led the way, thankful to get out of the heat and far away from whatever *that* was.

'Make yourselves comfortable,' Jake said, gesturing to the battered leather sofa. He took an armchair and Izzy perched beside him, craving the comfort of proximity. She chanced a glance at Finn, who was still pale.

DI Bell eased herself onto the sofa, laying her jacket carefully on the seat beside her, smoothing out an invisible crease. As if there was no rush.

'How's your mother?' she asked.

Izzy sighed. Her mother was one of the reasons she hadn't wanted to come back to Seahouses in the first place. And after Amy's death, Izzy's family drama had been laid out for everyone to gawp at. *Again.* The people in this village loved to gossip. She had learned the hard way, twice before. It would be a bloody circus, now.

'She's fine.' It was all she could manage to say.

'Tell me about the house,' said Bell. 'You haven't been here that long?'

Jake cleared his throat. 'We bought the place three months ago. Izzy and I, that is. She's a fixer-upper, all right. Quite the job!'

He was babbling, betraying his nervousness. Izzy placed a hand on his shoulder and offered a reassuring squeeze.

'And the previous owners?'

'It had been on the market for a while,' Izzy mumbled.

The amount of work required had put many people off, according to the estate agent who had showed Izzy and Jake around.

'An elderly couple lived here before.' Jake sounded calmer now. 'Well, just the wife, at the end. The daughter sold it.'

DI Bell nodded. 'We'll need to speak to her.'

'I have her details, somewhere,' he said.

'Will it be on the news?' Finn blurted out. 'I mean if it does turn out to be… what I think it is?'

He was already thinking about his role in the press coverage, Izzy could tell. About being on TV and the stories he would be able to tell his mates down the pub. She imagined the events of this morning growing more dramatic, gorier, with each retelling. She couldn't blame Finn; not much happened in Seahouses.

'One step at a time,' said DI Bell.

The other detective – Izzy had already forgotten his name – consulted his notebook. 'I noticed there's a lane at the end of the garden.'

'Yes.' Jake nodded. 'It's a cut that runs along the back, all the way to Seafield Road.'

The man nodded. 'So anyone could gain access?'

A knock at the door interrupted them before either could respond, and Izzy made a mental note to add replacing the doorbell to her list of priority projects.

'That'll be forensics.' DI Bell nodded to her colleague. 'Get that for us, would you, Rich?'

This is how it starts, thought Izzy. Already, it wasn't even up to her to answer her own front door. Once again, their lives would be available for public consumption, a buffet for strangers to pick over. The circus had come to town.

From the armchair, she watched as people in white suits and heavy boots trudged through her home. Moon men. More arrived, using the cut at the bottom of the garden for access.

A white tent appeared where the conservatory had stood, and Izzy observed with detachment as a dog handler encouraged a German Shepherd to sniff around the flowerbeds she was planning to landscape. They wheeled in a generator and rigged up lighting.

At some point, Jake told Finn to go home for the day. Izzy didn't say goodbye.

The day turned from cornflower to ochre, pinks and lilacs streaking the sky as the sun began its descent. The police continued working as darkness finally fell.

'What a mess,' said Jake. 'Perhaps you should stay at Mike's tonight?'

Izzy shook her head. She didn't want to impose on her brother-in-law. She just wanted this to all go away.

‘They’ll be out there for a few days,’ he said softly.

‘The kids.’ There was no way they could have her nieces and nephew hanging around with all this going on. ‘I’ll ask Auntie Sue if she can have them this weekend.’

The advantage of the whole family living close by was that the children always had somewhere to go. Between Izzy, her mother and her aunt, there were enough people to make sure Mike got a break from parenting single-handedly.

But she’d have to tell them about this. Tell them what they’d found.

‘Who do you think it is?’ She allowed herself to voice the question that had been plaguing her all afternoon. Jake folded her in his arms and she leaned into him, inhaling his familiar scent for comfort.

‘Who knows? Could be linked to the old owners. They’ll check the missing persons’ register to start with.’ He sighed. ‘They’ll know more in the coming days.’

The whole village will know more in the coming days, Izzy mused.

They were interrupted by DI Bell. ‘That’s us done for now. The forensics team will keep working through the night. We’ll keep an officer stationed at the access point, just in case.’

She didn’t need to explain that it was a necessary precaution to stem the inevitable tide of rubberneckers that would arrive by morning. News of a body being found would already have spread, and Izzy knew that the more inquisitive locals wouldn’t be able to help themselves.

How had someone managed to bury a body without being caught? The garden was visible from at least a dozen houses. Hadn’t anyone questioned why their neighbour was digging up his lawn?

There were shadows under DI Bell’s eyes now. Presumably it wasn’t every day that she uncovered human remains in a back garden. As a detective covering a largely rural beat, she was probably more used to dealing with missing pets and speeding drivers.

Except for that one murder case. Amy.

It struck Izzy, then, that she was the common denominator in this. Perhaps bad luck was following her around.

Or perhaps it was Seahouses? For a village where everyone knew everyone, people seemed to be remarkably good at hiding secrets. Or at least, burying them.