

Prologue

TIN CAN ALLEY, the bright green sign at the entrance to Brighton Palace Pier declared. THREE THROWS FOR £2. TRY YOUR LUCK. The delighted shrieks of children playing on the sand below and the sweet smell of fried dough, spun sugar and salty sea air made the declaration seem like a promise – *today is your lucky day*.

Giant multi-coloured soft toys lined the top of the stall, framing the dreadlocked blonde woman restacking shiny tins with a practised flick of the hand. She wore light denim daisy dukes and a red vest top emblazoned with the moniker ‘Ginny’ in swirly lettering. Ginny’s skin was tanned and smelled of coconut.

‘Come on lads, how about a free practice shot?’ she called, directing the full beam of her charm onto a group of three teenage boys. Polo shirts buttoned up to the top, knee-length rolled-up shorts, hair slick with gel, the lads stepped up to the challenge.

‘What do I want with a giant teddy bear?’ the first lad asked in a thick South London accent.

The girl leaned forwards onto her arms, the swell of her breasts exaggerated by the movement. 'You could give it to your girlfriend,' she suggested, the grin still dancing on her lips. She blew the gum in her mouth into a pink bubble then let it pop.

'I ain't got a girlfriend.'

'Boyfriend then,' she said, quick as you like. She had replaced her usual soft tones for a cheekier *Carry On* style of banter and the other two boys laughed.

'I ain't got one of those neither,' he grumbled, his cheeks colouring.

'Good-lookin' bloke like you? Must be beating them away.' She knew the patter and the boys knew it too. It was a sweltering summer afternoon at the coast and this was what they were here for, what they were all here for, the dozens of tourists milling around on the pier with their candy floss and ice creams. The authentic British seaside experience. They had money to burn, every one of them. She'd take thirty quid off this group alone, easy. She might even let the quiet one on the end win something. 'You gonna have a go then? I'll give you a practice go for free.'

The boy looked at his friends who nodded and shoved him forwards encouragingly. Another couple of tourists stopped to watch – she would definitely let one of them win now.

She handed him three beanbags, one yellow, one red and one blue. Stood back and gestured to the cans. 'Go for it, tiger.'

He stretched out his shoulder as though limbering up for the Olympics. Then he pulled his arm back and hurled the first beanbag at the tins.

He didn't need the other two bags. The tins clattered to the ground with a satisfying crash and the watching crowd whooped. Ginny jumped up and down, cheering and clapping.

'Woohoo!' she said, restacking. 'You made that look easy. Told you it weren't hard, if you've got the skill.'

As the boy handed over his money, she noticed a young woman join the crowd at the end of the stall, head down, eyes glued to her phone, but there was no doubt she was watching. Twelve months, the woman had been away. Why was she here?

The lad hurled the beanbags again, as straight and true as the first time, but on this try only the top three tins crashed to the ground. The crowd groaned as the second bag shifted the remaining three cans along the shelf but none of them fell. Before the lad could take his final swing, the woman with the dark blonde hair took his arm and whispered something in his ear. The girl behind the stall gritted her teeth.

‘What did she say to you?’ she demanded, her cheerful *Carry On* lilt dropping away. The boy frowned.

‘Here, swap those tins with the ones on the floor,’ he said, pointing at the three left on the shelf. The girl shook her head.

‘That’s not the game. Why don’t you just take your last shot? You’ll probably get them with this one.’

She’d lost and she knew it. The boy shook his head. ‘Swap them or I’ll tell this lot what she said. Maybe I’ll tell the police too.’

With a scowl, she swapped the tins for the three on the floor. The boy took aim and knocked all three tins off with his last shot. The crowd cheered and he grinned.

‘I’ll have that one, cheers,’ he said, pointing at a giant green lion. Ginny pulled it down and handed it over, furious. He turned to the woman who had given him his lucky tip-off and, with a flourish of a bow, presented her with the lion. ‘For you.’

The woman grinned and took the soft toy, raising her eyebrows at Ginny. The crowd dispersed, not entirely knowing what had just happened but knowing well enough the show was over. All except the dark blonde woman who stood surveying the Tin Can Alley stall with her lion clasped in her arms.

‘Thanks a bunch,’ Ginny said, climbing over her stall to sit on her stool out front. ‘I had them on the hook then. What are you doing here, anyway? You’re lucky Dad’s not here to see you narc on your little sister.’

The woman shrugged. ‘I came to show you this.’ She pulled something out of her pocket and showed it to the girl, whose face darkened.

‘So the rumours are true. Why bother coming back then?’

‘I wanted to be the one to tell you, but I should have guessed you’d already know. What does Dad think?’

‘What do you think he thinks?’ the girl said, hopping down and pulling the shutter closed. ‘You’ve made your choice. Now we all get to live with it.’ She put her hand to her eyes to shield the sun. ‘Shame. We liked having you around.’

‘I’m sorry, for what it’s worth.’

‘I know.’

The woman gestured to the closed-up Tin Can Alley. ‘Seems a bit small fry for your tastes.’

‘Ginny’ shook her head. ‘It’s not even my stand. The owner was on his break and I was just having a bit of fun.’ She raised her eyebrows at the giant green lion. ‘So technically you’ve stolen that toy. *Officer.*’

Chapter One

The first body fell from the sky at 16.05 p.m. on Tuesday 5 February, landing seconds later at the feet of a woman waiting for the number 7 bus on Grove Hill. The woman, who gave her name to the 999 operator as Emilie Jasper, was so distraught that she spent the emergency call alternating between sobs and rapid half-sentences in French, and consequently, paramedics and police were sent in the first instance to a suicide. It was not their first at this particular row of Brighton flats, marked with the graffitied evidence of despair and drug overdose. But what was a surprise was the discovery by paramedics that the dead man's hands were bound loosely with rope and his throat so viciously slashed that it was almost sliced clean through. That was when the paramedics rapidly progressed the call to a murder, and it was put through to the spotless desk of Acting Detective Inspector Tess Fox of Sussex Major Crimes Team. Special emphasis on the *Acting*.

DI Fox was on her feet before the call ended, waving a piece of paper in the face of Jerome Morgan, her detective sergeant.

'Incident in Grove Hill, Brighton. Suspected homicide.' Tess lifted her jacket from the hook – February evenings were bitter the closer you got to the sea. She shrugged it on and twisted her long blonde ponytail into a bun, wondered if that possibly looked too harsh, and

let it back down into a ponytail. Jerome, who had already decided the last hour of his shift was not going to be a productive one, hadn't moved. He was holding his phone at arm's length, then bringing it up close to his face, squinting at the screen as though trying to figure out something significantly more important than Tess's first murder as an acting DI.

'Can you ever see these hidden picture things? I couldn't see a bloody giraffe when I was a kid and I still can't see one now. Do you think that means I'm colour blind?'

'Get. Up.' Tess prodded him in the shoulder with her pen. 'Is Oswald still in his office?'

'Gone home,' Jerome replied of their DCI. 'Janice wants a new car. He's had to go with her to stop her buying the most expensive thing on the forecourt.' Tess circled the room, silently thanking her boss's wife as she calculated her next move. With Oswald gone, she would be the first detective on the scene, an opportunity she'd been waiting for since her temporary promotion three months ago, a chance to show that she deserved for the job to be permanent. If she called him now, he might call someone else in to cover it – someone with more experience. She made her decision.

'We'll call him from the car. When we're almost there. On your feet, Morgan.'

Jerome raised his eyebrows and pushed himself away from his desk. 'Whatever you say, boss. Time to make a coffee first?'

'No, we bloody haven't.' Tess twisted her ponytail back into a bun and headed for the door. Motivating Jerome was like trying to get a child ready for school. 'Get a move on.'

Jerome let out an exaggerated sigh. 'He's not getting any less dead if I have some caffeine.'

'Tell you what, I'll let you drive. Fast as you like. If you just get a move on.'

Jerome grinned and pretended to roll up his sleeves. 'Not one of the shit cars then.'

Tess smiled back. 'Whatever you can get your hands on. Your choice.'

Half an hour later, high-rise flats and Victorian houses began to spring up between the trees, the Sussex countryside retreating as every turn of the wheel took them further into urban Brighton. Tess's head had begun to pound, her stomach churning as if she was on a Palace Pier rollercoaster. Was she nervous? Bloody hell, that was a new one on her. Tess Fox did not do nerves. Although her queasiness could equally have been due to the speed they were going – driving fast was one of Jerome's favourite things in life. Tess was half convinced that he had joined the police in the first place because his driving was too shitty for a Formula One racer.

'White male, early forties, wound to the throat believed to be fatal. The police sergeant at the scene has the building locked down and is awaiting your arrival for further instructions. Crime scene manager on route.' She read the note from Control out loud and looked for Jerome's reaction. 'Does that sound like a domestic to you?'

Jerome raised an eyebrow, keeping his eyes on the road. Which, given the speed he was driving at, was a godsend. 'Unlikely,' he said. 'When was the last time you had a domestic where the wife slits her husband's throat and shoves him from a window? Sounds more like—'

'Don't say it,' Tess pointed her biro at him. 'Don't say organized crime. I am not handing over my first case as acting DI to SOCU.'

He shrugged, and a brooding silence descended on their unmarked police car. To have her first murder turn out to be just a domestic, or – at the other end of the spectrum – serious organized crime, would be a major disappointment, if not a disaster.

'If it's not a domestic, Walker is going to be furious he missed out on it,' Jerome said.

'I know,' Tess grinned. 'Shame. It would have really helped his chances of getting the promotion.'

'I've never heard anyone sound so gleeful at the news of a gruesome murder.'

Tess cringed. ‘Shit, I know. I’m a terrible person. I’ve just worked so hard for this, Jerome.’

‘Don’t sweat it,’ he said, and Tess wondered if one day she might walk in and he’d have those words tattooed on his face. Jerome was the most sweatless person she knew. ‘We all know that promotion is yours, boss.’

She didn’t answer. If she was completely honest, she agreed with Jerome’s estimate of her, but she wasn’t going to tempt fate by saying it out loud. Instead she gave him a small smile. ‘From your lips to the DCI’s ears.’ She glanced out of the window at the terraces filled with pizza places, convenience stores and gateless, gardenless houses that had probably once been beautifully rendered pure white but now looked like a row of greying, time-worn sentries.

‘God, I hate this place. It’s like an arthritic, ageing ballerina who can’t let go of the fact that she used to be someone.’

‘Nah, I love it,’ Jerome disagreed, one finger tapping the wheel as he took another corner at the speed of light. ‘Mum and Dad used to bring us here every weekend in the summer – my aunty had one of those houses in Hanover and I spent half my life hanging around Preston Park drinking with my feckless cousins or giving the Punch and Judy bloke grief. Did you know that those creepy Punch and Judy dolls originated in Italy?’

‘I did not know that.’

‘He was called Punchinello. And the crocodile was originally the devil. Which seems a bit dark.’

‘Fine to slap Judy around and drop the baby, though – funny how that made the final cut,’ Tess grumbled. Jerome was full of this kind of interesting bullshit. Tess had never met a man like him. It had been awkward working with him at first, what with him being almost offensively attractive. Dark brown skin, defined muscles visible through expensive tailored

shirts, and a smile that didn't just invite you to bed but made you breakfast afterwards. Oh, and he always smelled amazing. When they'd first been introduced, Tess had no idea how she was expected to work with a man who looked like an underwear model, but luckily, he hadn't seemed to fancy her in the slightest, and once her cheeks had stopped turning the colour of postboxes every time he spoke, they had fallen into an easy friendship. As it turned out, DS Morgan was a complex ball of contradictions – a ladies' man who treated women with respect right up until the moment they began to get serious, at which point he would cut and run. He was a joker and a clown, but he could throw out the most random nuggets of nerdy general knowledge, and was always the most popular at a pub quiz. But above all, Jerome was a good copper and a loyal friend.

'Looks like we're here.' Jerome motioned up ahead where flashing blue and red reflected in every window, lighting up the street like a macabre circus show. A marked vehicle blocked the long road, crammed with high rises that gave way in the distance to Victorian terraces tracing a lane to the skyline.

Tess took in the scene. Eleven-storey flats, central stairways, balconies at both ends of each floor. Twenty-two premises at the front. Were there more at the back? Armed officers guarded the entrance, but Tess spotted the officer in charge immediately. A short, muscular man with dark, close-cropped hair barking orders into his radio, a small crown embroidered on each shoulder marking him as a superintendent.

Teenagers in grubby tracksuits, young women with prams and the odd student clasping their A4 lever arches and knapsacks were gathered in clusters, clamouring for a look at what was going on behind the police tape. The old folks had stayed inside – February in Brighton could chill you to your bones and evenings drew in fast – but that didn't stop them standing in their windows, curtains not so much twitching but drawn aside altogether for a better view. Fortunately, the body was in a forensics tent, hidden from prying eyes.

Jerome rolled up to the police car with his window down and waved his warrant card at the PC in the driver's seat. The PC nodded and straightened up his vehicle. Jerome didn't wait for him to finish pulling over before squeezing his BMW through and pulling up behind the forensics van, not bothering to go in straight. Despite the seniority of the officer in charge, this would be their crime scene now.

Tess approached the superintendent with her warrant card held up. 'Acting DI Fox, DS Morgan.' She spoke in confident, clipped tones, checking her watch as she introduced them to indicate that they were up against the clock. It was going to be a fight against the oncoming darkness at this rate, and that was one they wouldn't win.

He reached out to shake her hand. 'Superintendent Taeko. We can't go in until the building is secure.'

Tess frowned. 'Do you think there's a chance our guy might still be inside?' People didn't often hang around after they'd thrown a man from a balcony. 'He's had plenty of chance to get away.'

'We're searching the surrounding areas. As soon as the poor bloke hit the floor, people were streaming out of the flats to get a look – it's been a right job getting everyone back where they should be.' The comment was pointed; he clearly resented that Jerome and Tess had turned up after all the hard work had been done. 'Our killer could have disappeared during any of that, obviously. The thing is, we've got a tentative ID from the building manager, so we think we know which flat he's from. This particular block had CCTV installed last year after a spate of crimes, and we've reviewed the footage from three p.m. to now – we haven't found anyone in that corridor or leaving the building since. We're carrying out a search of every flat. And we've secured the entrance and exit routes to the one we believe belongs to the victim.' He pointed up at a balcony on the fourth floor. 'So unless the perp climbed off the balcony after him, he's still in that building.'

The radio in his hand crackled to life. 'Go ahead,' Taeko barked.

'Sir, the corridor is secure. Flats have been searched and tenants advised to stay inside. We're ready to go in on the count of three.'

Tess pictured the corridor full of armed police, adrenaline pumping through the veins of every one of them. She held her breath, listening to the radio for any hint of what was going on inside, half wishing she was in there with them, closer to the action.

'One? Come in, ready on one?' The Super's radio counted down to the forced entry.

'One, ready on one.'

'Going in, sir. Armed police! Open up!'

A pause. Tess looked up at the balcony the Super had pointed to, scanning for any signs of life. Seconds later, an ear-splitting crash signalled armed police storming the flat. Someone screamed. Tess looked at the Super, unable to tell if the scream came from inside the flat or from one of the women hanging over the balcony above. They watched the radio, jumping as voices blared from it again.

'We're in, repeat boss, we're in. No gunfire, no casualties.'

The Super punched the air. 'Have you got him?'

Silence. White noise, then more silence through the radio. Tess moved instinctively closer to the radio, waiting. Was their suspect under arrest?

The radio sprang to life again.

'Negative, sir. The flat is empty.'

Tess swore. She rounded on the superintendent. 'I thought you said your team had checked the CCTV?'

The superintendent looked as confused as she felt.

'They have. I told you, no one walked down that corridor after three p.m.'

Tess looked up at the balcony, where an armed officer was visible in the doorway.

The other tenants in the building were now shouting out of their flats to the police, some demanding to be told what was going on, others demanding to be let out. Dusk was closing in now and she knew that every minute that passed she was in danger of losing this investigation.

‘That’s impossible. You must have the wrong flat. We’re going to have to search them all again.’

By 16.59, official sunset on an already overcast and drizzly February evening, DI Tess Fox was pushing through the opening of the crime scene tent, where the victim was still sprawled on the small stretch of grass at the foot of the block of flats. The armed response team had concluded that Flat 40, Mortenhurst, was well and truly empty, and were working to secure the rest of the building. Tess took a deep breath as she saw that Kay Langley was the on-call medical examiner. *Great.*

Kay Langley, a small woman with short, spiky grey hair and piercing blue eyes, pulled her mask down and held up her hand in greeting. Kay and her partner, Beth, had been friends with Tess’s ex-fiancé growing up, and the four of them had shared an easy friendship right up until the moment Tess had got cold feet and called off their engagement. Things had been awkward between them ever since, to say the least. Tess remembered the last time they had all hung out together, wrestling with the pull-out sofa with Beth because all four of them had stayed up until three in the morning discussing the merits of criminal profiling – Tess being on the side of the profilers, Kay and Chris staunchly against. Beth, a photographer, hadn’t given a toss either way and had proved a brilliant referee. Tess got the feeling she was well versed in Kay’s passionate outbursts and knew how to manage her perfectly. Truth be

told, she missed Kay and Beth's friendship almost as much as she missed Chris. And she did miss Chris. He might not have been the man she wanted to marry, but he was a good man, a good friend. Tess had wondered more than once since the break-up if she'd made the wrong decision. If being with the wrong man was better than being alone. She wasn't about to let thoughts like that get in her way today though. She was unstoppable. She was a force to be reckoned with. She was made for this job.

'Tess, great to see you again,' Kay said, walking over and waving a gloved hand. 'I won't hug you for obvious reasons.'

To anyone watching, this was a perfectly friendly exchange between colleagues. To Tess, it was the cringiest greeting of her life. She much preferred loud, swearsy Kay, the one who would have put her instantly at ease, despite the presence of the dead man between them.

'Good to see you too,' Tess cleared her throat. 'Cause of death?' she asked, knowing what the reply would be.

Spotlights illuminated the corpse making a macabre centrepiece. He was spreadeagled on the ground, his neck contorted at an unnatural angle, blood staining his chest and the pavement below. One knee was turned outwards, the other pointing in. The thick black wound on his throat twisted upwards in a demonic smile.

'This isn't a post-mortem, DI Fox,' Kay admonished, as Tess knew she would. 'There are two obvious places we will start. The throat wound would have killed him, but so would the impact – I'll need to take a closer look at the other injuries. It's going to be near impossible to tell which was the definitive cause. There's a lot of blood here, that much I can tell you. I'm not going to be able to bag his head – the blood is too fresh.'

'Which tells me what?'

'Just that the injuries occurred almost simultaneously.' She mimed a thumb across her throat and then a shove as if from a cliff.

Tess bit her lip. 'Why bother throwing him off a balcony if he's going to die from the throat injury anyway?'

Kay stayed silent, another indication that they were no longer friends. Once upon a time, she'd have speculated with her. Tess suddenly felt more alone than she had since she had called off her engagement. Her friends had been his friends, her colleagues had been his colleagues. She had no family other than her mother, with whom her relationship could only be described as strained.

Breaking the silence, Kay said, 'I've bagged the rope that was around his wrists. It wasn't tied tightly, just wrapped. Seems like he could have got out of it if he'd tried. Might have been done just before he was pushed so he didn't have time.'

'Anything else? Any identifying marks?'

'Just this tattoo,' Kay replied. She lifted the man's stiffened arm and Tess was confronted with a close-up view of the marks on his pale wrist. Later, Acting DI Tess Fox would pinpoint this as the exact moment that her first big case turned into her personal living nightmare.