

SILENT SCREAM

Angela Marsons lives in the Black Country with her partner,
their bouncy labrador and a swearing parrot.

Also by Angela Marsons

Evil Games

Lost Girls

Play Dead

Angela
MARSONS

**SILENT
SCREAM**

ZAFFRE

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This book is dedicated to my partner, Julie Forrest, who never stopped believing and never allowed me to forget my dream.

PROLOGUE

Rowley Regis, Black Country, 2004

Five figures formed a pentagram around a freshly dug mound. Only they knew it was a grave.

Digging the frozen earth beneath the layers of ice and snow had been like trying to carve stone but they'd taken turns. All of them.

An adult-sized hole would have taken longer.

The shovel had passed from grip to grip. Some were hesitant, tentative. Others more assured. No one resisted and no one spoke.

The innocence of the life taken was known to them all but the pact had been made. Their secrets would be buried.

Five heads bowed towards the dirt, visualising the body beneath soil that already glistened with fresh ice.

As the first flakes dusted the top of the grave, a shudder threaded through the group.

The five figures dispersed, their footprints treading the trail of a star into the fresh, crisp snow.

It was done.

Black Country, Present Day

Teresa Wyatt had the inexplicable feeling that this night would be her last.

She switched off the television and the house fell quiet. It wasn't the normal silence that descended each evening as she and her home gently closed down and unwound towards bedtime.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting on the late night news. The announcement had already been made on the local evening news programme. Perhaps she was hoping for a miracle, some last-minute reprieve.

Ever since the first application two years ago she had felt like a prisoner on death row. Intermittently the guards had come, taken her to the chair and then fate had returned her to the safety of the cell. But this time was final. Teresa knew there would be no further objections, no more delays.

She wondered if the others had seen the news. Did they feel the same way she did? Would they admit to themselves that their primary feelings were not remorse but self-preservation?

Had she been a nicer person there might have been a smattering of conscience buried beneath her concern for herself, but there was not.

Had she not gone along with the plan, she would have been ruined, she told herself. The name Teresa Wyatt would have been mentioned with distaste, instead of the respect she now enjoyed.

Teresa had no doubt that the complaint would have been taken seriously. The source had been devious, but believable. But it had been silenced forever – and that was something she would never regret.

But now and again in the years since Crestwood her stomach had lurched at the sight of a similar gait or a hair colour or a tilt of the head.

Teresa stood and tried to throw off the melancholy that shadowed her. She strode to the kitchen and put the single plate and wine glass into the dishwasher.

There was no dog to let out or cat to let in. Just the final night-time security check of the deadbolts.

Again, she was struck by a feeling that the safety check was pointless, that nothing could hold back the past. She pushed the thought away. There was nothing to fear. They had all made a pact and it had held strong for ten years. Only the five of them knew the truth.

She knew she was too tense to drift off to sleep immediately but she had called a seven a.m. staff meeting for which she could not be late.

She stepped into the bathroom and began to run the water, adding a generous measure of lavender-infused bubble bath.

The scent instantly filled the room. A long soak on top of the earlier glass of wine should induce sleep.

The dressing gown and satin pyjamas were folded neatly on top of the laundry basket as she stepped into the tub.

She closed her eyes and surrendered to the water as it enveloped her. She smiled to herself as the anxiety began to recede. She was just being hypersensitive.

Teresa felt that her life had been divided into two segments. There were thirty-seven years B.C., as she called her life Before Crestwood. Those years had been charmed. Single and ambitious, every decision had been her own. She had answered to no one.

But the years since had been different. A shadow of fear had followed her every move, dictated her actions, influenced her decisions.

She remembered reading somewhere that conscience was no more than the fear of being caught. Teresa was honest enough to admit that, for her, the statement was true.

But their secret was safe. It had to be.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of a glass panel shattering. But the sound was not in the distance. It was at her kitchen door.

Teresa lay perfectly still, her ears straining for further sounds. The noise would not have alerted anyone else. The next detached home sat two hundred feet away, on the other side of a Leylandii hedge that rose twenty feet high.

The silence of her house thickened around her. The quiet that followed the loud noise was fraught with menace.

Perhaps it was nothing more than a mindless act of vandalism. Maybe a couple of the students from Saint Joseph's had learned her address. By God, she hoped so.

The blood thundered along her veins, vibrating into her temples. She swallowed, in an attempt to clear her eardrums.

Her body began to react to the sensation that she was no longer alone. She brought herself to a sitting position. The sound of the water rearranging itself was loud as it sloshed against the tub. Her hand slipped on the porcelain and her right side fell back into the water.

A sound at the bottom of the stairs destroyed any vague hope of mindless vandalism.

Teresa knew that she was out of time. In a parallel universe, the muscles in her body reacted to the impending threat, but in this one both her body and her mind were stilled by the inevitable. She knew that there was nowhere left to hide.

As she heard the creak of the stairs she briefly closed her eyes and willed her body to stay calm. There was an element of freedom when finally confronted by the fears that haunted her.

As she felt the cool air enter the room from the doorway, she opened her eyes.

The figure that entered was as black and featureless as a shadow. Utility trousers met a thick black fleece which was covered by a long overcoat. A woollen balaclava covered the face. But why me? Teresa's mind raged. She was not the weakest link.

She shook her head. 'I haven't spoken,' she said. The words were barely audible. Every one of her senses was beginning to close down as her body prepared for death.

The black figure took two steps towards her. Teresa searched for a clue but found none. It could only be one of four.

Teresa felt the betrayal of her body as urine slipped from between her legs into the scented water.

‘I promise . . . I haven’t . . .’

Teresa’s words trailed away as she tried to lift herself to a sitting position. The bath bubbles had turned the tub slippery.

Her breath came in short, sharp rasps as she considered how best to beg for her life. No, she didn’t want to die. It wasn’t time. She wasn’t ready. There were things that she wanted to do.

She had the sudden image of water flooding her lungs, inflating them like party balloons.

She held out her hand imploringly, finally finding her voice. ‘Please . . . please . . . no . . . I don’t want to die . . .’

The figure leaned over the bath and placed a gloved hand above each breast. Teresa felt the pressure being applied to force her under the water and struggled to sit up. She had to try and explain but the force of the hands increased. Again she tried to rear up from her prone position but it was hopeless. Gravity and brute strength made it impossible for her to fight back.

As the water framed her face she opened her mouth. A small sob escaped from between her lips as she tried one last time. ‘I swear . . .’

The words were cut short and Teresa watched as the air bubbles escaped from her nose and reached the surface. Her hair swam around her face.

The figure shimmered on the other side of the water barrier.

Teresa’s body began to react to the oxygen deprivation and she tried to quell the panic rising inside her. Her arms flailed and the gloved hand was briefly dislodged from her breast bone. She managed to raise her head above the water and got a closer look into the cold, piercing eyes. Recognition sapped the last of her breath.

The brief second of confusion was enough for her attacker to reposition. Two hands forced her body underwater and held her fast.

Her mind was full of disbelief, even as her consciousness began to wane.

Teresa realised that her co-conspirators could not even imagine who it was they had to fear.

Kim Stone stepped around the Kawasaki Ninja to adjust the volume on her iPod. The speakers danced with the silvery notes of Vivaldi's *Summer Concerto* as they headed towards her favourite part, the finale called 'Storm'.

She placed the socket wrench on the work bench and wiped her hands with a stray rag. She stared at the Triumph Thunderbird she'd been restoring for the past seven months and wondered why it had not captured her tonight.

She glanced at her watch. Almost eleven p.m. The rest of her team would be staggering out of The Dog right about now. And although she didn't touch alcohol, she accompanied her team when she felt she'd earned it.

She retrieved the socket wrench and lowered herself to the knee pad beside the Triumph.

It wasn't a celebration for her.

The terrified face of Laura Yates swam before her eyes as she reached inside the guts of the bike and found the rear end of the crankshaft. She placed the socket head over the nut and turned the wrench in a back and forth motion.

Three guilty verdicts of rape were going to send Terence Hunt away for a very long time.

'But not long enough,' Kim said to herself.

Because there had been a fourth victim.

She turned the wrench again but the nut refused to tighten. She'd already assembled the bearing, sprocket, clamping washer and rotor. The nut was the final puzzle piece and the damn thing refused to tighten against the locking washer.

Kim stared at the nut and silently willed it to move for its own sake. Still nothing. She focused her anger on the arm of the socket wrench and gave it one almighty push. The thread broke and the nut turned freely.

'Damn it,' she shouted, throwing the wrench across the garage.

Laura Yates had trembled in the witness box as she'd recounted the ordeal of being dragged behind a church and repeatedly brutally sexually assaulted for two and a half hours. They had seen with their own eyes how hard it had been for her to sit down, three months after the attack.

The nineteen-year-old had sat in the gallery as each guilty verdict was read out. Then it came to her case and two words were stated that would change her life for ever.

Not Guilty.

And why? Because the girl had consumed a couple of drinks. Forget the eleven stitches that stretched from back to front, the broken rib and the black eye. She must have asked for it, all because she'd had a couple of bloody drinks.

Kim was aware that her hands had started to tremble with rage.

Her team felt that three out of four wasn't bad. And it wasn't. But it wasn't good enough. Not for Kim.

She leaned down to inspect the damage to the bike. It had taken almost six weeks to track down those bloody screws.

She eased the socket into position and turned the wrench again between her thumb and forefinger as her mobile phone began to ring. She dropped the nut and jumped to her feet. A call so close to midnight was never going to be good news.

‘D.I. Stone.’

‘We have a body, Marm.’

Of course. What else could it have been?

‘Where?’

‘Hagley Road, Stourbridge.’

Kim knew the area. It was just on the border with their neighbours, West Mercia.

‘Should we put a call in to D.S. Bryant, Marm?’

Kim cringed. She hated the term Marm. At thirty-four, she wasn’t ready to be called Marm.

A picture of her colleague stumbling into a taxi outside The Dog came into her mind.

‘No, I think I’ll take this on my own,’ she said, ending the call.

Kim paused for two seconds as she silenced the iPod. She knew she had to let go of the accusation in the eyes of Laura Yates; real or imagined, she had seen it. And she couldn’t get it out of her mind.

She would always know that the justice in which she believed had failed someone it was designed to protect. She had persuaded Laura Yates to trust in both her and the system she represented and Kim couldn’t rid herself of the feeling that Laura had been let down. By both of them.

Four minutes after receiving the phone call, Kim was pulling off the drive in the ten-year-old Golf GTI that she used only when the roads were icy or when the firing of the Ninja would be an anti-social act.

The torn jeans stained with oil, grease and dust had been replaced by black canvas trousers and a plain white T-shirt. Her feet were now encased in black patent boots with a quarter-inch heel. Her short black hair required little maintenance. A quick comb from her fingers and she was ready to go.

Her customer would not be concerned.

She weaved the car to the end of the road. The machine felt alien within her control. Although it was only small, Kim had to concentrate on passing distances of parked cars. So much metal around her felt cumbersome.

A mile away from the target property, the smell of burning found its way in through the vents. As she travelled, the smell became stronger. Half a mile out, she could see a column of smoke leaning and reaching above the Clent Hills. A quarter mile, and Kim knew she was heading right for it.

Second only in size to the Met, the West Midlands Police covered almost 2.6 million inhabitants.

The Black Country was situated to the north and west of Birmingham and had become one of the most intensely industrialised regions in the country by Victorian times. Its name came from the outcropping coal that made the soil black over large areas. The thirty-foot seam of ore and coal was the thickest in Great Britain.

Now, unemployment levels in the area were the third highest in the country. Petty crime was on the increase, along with anti-social behaviour.

The crime scene sat just off the main road that linked Stourbridge to Hagley, an area that did not normally attract high levels of law-breaking. The houses closest to the road were new double-fronted properties with sparkling white Roman columns and black, leaded windows. Further along the road the houses were spread further apart and were considerably older.

Kim pulled up at the cordon and parked between two fire tenders. Without speaking, she flashed her ID to the officer guarding the perimeter tape. He nodded and lifted it for her to duck underneath.

‘What happened?’ she asked the first fire officer she found.

He pointed to the remains of the first conifer tree at the edge of the property. ‘Fire was started there and spread through most of the trees before we got here.’

Kim noted that of the thirteen trees that formed the property line, only the two closest to the house were untouched.

‘You discovered the body?’

He pointed to a fire officer sitting on the ground, talking to a constable. 'Just about everyone else was out watching the commotion but this house stayed dark. Neighbours assured us that the black Range Rover was hers and that she lived alone.'

Kim nodded and approached the fire officer on the ground. He looked pale and she noted a slight tremble to his right hand. Finding a dead body was never pleasant, no matter what training you'd had.

'Did you touch anything?' she asked.

He thought for a second and then shook his head. 'The bathroom door was open but I didn't step inside.'

Kim paused at the front door, reached into the cardboard box to the left and took out blue plastic coverings for her feet.

Kim took the stairs two at a time and entered the bathroom. She immediately located Keats, the pathologist. He was a diminutive figure with a completely bald head, set off by a moustache and a beard that fell into a point below his chin. He'd had the honour of guiding her through her first post-mortem eight years earlier.

'Hey, Detective,' he said, looking around her. 'Where's Bryant?'

'Jesus, we're not joined at the hip.'

'Yeah, but you're like a Chinese dish. Sweet and sour pork . . . but without Bryant you're just sour . . .'

'Keats, how amused do you think I am at this time of night?'

'Your sense of humour isn't really evident any time to be fair.'

Oh, how she wanted to retaliate. If she wished to, she could comment on the fact that the creases in his black trousers were not quite straight. Or she could point out that the collar of his

shirt was slightly frayed. She could even mention the small bloodstain on the back of his coat.

But right now a naked body lay between them, demanding her full attention.

Kim moved closer to the bath slowly, careful not to slip on the water that was being sloshed around by two white suits.

The body of the female lay partly submerged. Her eyes were open and her dyed blonde hair was fanned out in the water, framing her face.

Her body floated, so that the tips of her breasts broke the surface of the water.

Kim guessed the female to be mid- to late forties but well kept. Her upper arms appeared toned but limp flesh hung in the water. Her toenails were painted a soft pink and no stubble showed on her legs.

The volume of water on the floor indicated that a struggle had taken place and that the woman had fought for her life.

Kim heard footsteps thundering up the stairs.

‘Detective Inspector Stone, a pleasant surprise.’

Kim groaned, recognising the voice and the sarcasm dripping from the words.

‘Detective Inspector Wharton, the pleasure is all mine.’

The two of them had worked together a few times and her disdain had never been hidden. He was a career officer who wanted to climb the ladder as quickly as possible. He had no interest in solving cases, only adding to his tally.

His final humiliation had been when she’d made D.I. before he had. Her early promotion had prompted him to move

house and transfer to West Mercia, a smaller force with less competition.

‘What are you doing here? I think you’ll find this is a West Mercia case.’

‘And I think you’ll find it’s right on the border and I got first dibs.’

Unconsciously, she’d stepped in front of the bath. The victim didn’t need any more curious eyes roving over her naked body.

‘It’s my case, Stone.’

Kim shook her head and folded her arms. ‘I ain’t budging, Tom.’ She tipped her head. ‘We could always make this a joint investigation. I was here first, so I’ll lead.’

His thin mean face filled with colour. Reporting to her would be done only after gouging out his own eyeballs with a rusty spoon.

She assessed him from head to toe. ‘And my first instruction would be to enter the crime scene with appropriate protection.’

He looked down at her feet and then at his own unprotected footwear. More haste, less speed, she thought to herself.

She lowered her voice. ‘Don’t make this a pissing contest, Tom.’

He gave her a look filled with contempt before turning and storming out of the bathroom.

Kim turned her attention back to the body.

‘You’d have won,’ Keats said quietly.

‘Huh?’

His eyes danced with amusement. ‘The pissing contest.’

Kim nodded. She knew.

‘Can we get her out of here yet?’

‘Just a couple more close-ups of her breastbone.’

As he spoke, one of the forensic officers pointed a camera with a lens the length of an exhaust pipe at the woman’s breasts.

Kim leaned in closer and saw two marks above each breast.

‘Pushed down?’

‘I’m thinking so. Preliminary exam shows no other injuries. I’ll tell you more after the post-mortem.’

‘Any guesses on how long?’

Kim could see no evidence of the liver probe, so she was guessing he’d used the rectal thermometer before she’d arrived.

She knew that a body dropped temperature by 1.5 degrees centigrade in the first hour. Normally it was between 1.5 and 1.0 degree centigrade every hour thereafter. She also knew that figure to be affected by many other factors. Not least that the victim was naked and submerged in now-cold water.

He shrugged. ‘I’ll do further calculations later but I’d say no more than about two hours.’

‘When can you . . .’

‘I’ve got a ninety-six-year-old lady who expired after falling asleep in her armchair and a twenty-six-year-old male with the needle still in his arm.’

‘Nothing urgent then?’

He checked his watch. ‘Midday?’

‘Eight,’ she countered.

‘Ten and no earlier,’ he grumbled. ‘I’m human and need occasional rest.’

‘Perfect,’ she said. It was the exact time she had in mind. It would give her the chance to brief her team and task someone to attend.

Kim heard more footsteps on the stairs. The sound of laboured breathing came closer.

‘Sergeant Travis,’ she said, without turning. ‘What have we got?’

‘Officers are canvassing the area. The FOA rounded up a couple of neighbours but the first thing they knew was the fire service rolling up. Alert call was from a passing motorist.’

Kim turned and nodded. The First Officer Attending had done a good job of securing the scene for the forensics team and corralling any potential witnesses, but the houses were set back from the road and separated by a quarter acre. Not exactly a mecca for the nosy neighbour.

‘Go on,’ she said.

‘Point of entry was a smashed glass panel in the back door and the fire officer states that the front door was unlocked.’

‘Hmmm . . . interesting.’

She nodded her thanks and headed down the stairs.

One technician was inspecting the hallway and another was dusting the back door for fingerprints. A designer handbag sat on the breakfast bar. Kim had no idea what the gold monogrammed fastener meant. She never used handbags but it looked expensive.

A third tech entered from the dining room next door. He nodded towards the handbag. ‘Nothing taken. Credit cards and cash still intact.’

Kim nodded and headed out of the house. At the doorway she removed the shoe coverings and placed them into a second box. All protective clothing would be removed from the scene and examined for trace evidence later.

She stepped under the cordon. One fire tender remained on watch to ensure the blaze was totally extinguished. Fire was clever and just one ember that went unnoticed could set the place ablaze within minutes.

She stood at the car, surveying the bigger picture of the scene before her.

Teresa Wyatt lived alone. Nothing appeared to have been taken or even disturbed.

The killer could have left safe in the knowledge that the body would not be discovered until the following morning at the earliest and yet they had started a fire to expedite police attention.

Now all Kim had to do was work out why.

At seven thirty a.m. Kim parked the Ninja at Halesowen police station, just off the ring road that circled a town with a small shopping precinct and a college. The station was located within spitting distance of the magistrates' court; convenient, but a bitch for claiming expenses.

The three-storey building was as drab and unwelcoming as any other government building that apologised to tax-paying citizens.

She navigated her way to the detectives' office without offering any morning greetings and none were offered to her. Kim knew she had a reputation for being cold, socially inept and emotionless. This perception deflected banal small talk and that was fine by her.

As usual, she was first into the detectives' office and so fired up the coffee machine. The room held four desks in two sets of two facing each other. Each desk mirrored its partner, with a computer screen and mismatched file trays.

Three of the desks accommodated permanent occupants but the fourth sat empty since they had been downsized a few months earlier. It was where she normally perched herself rather than in her office.

The space with Kim's name on the door was commonly referred to as The Bowl. It was nothing more than an area in the top right-hand corner of the room that was partitioned off by plasterboard and glass.

It was a space she used for the occasional 'individual performance directive', otherwise known as a good old-fashioned bollocking.

'Morning, Guv,' Detective Constable Wood called as she slid into her chair. Although her family background was half English and half Nigerian, Stacey had never set foot outside the United Kingdom. Her tight black hair was cut short and close to her head following the removal of her last weave. The smooth caramel skin suited the haircut well.

Stacey's work area was organised and clear. Anything not in the labelled trays was stacked in meticulous piles along the top edge of her desk.

Not far behind was Detective Sergeant Bryant who mumbled a 'Morning, Guv,' as he glanced into The Bowl. His six-foot frame looked immaculate, as though he had been dressed for Sunday school by his mother.

Immediately the suit jacket landed on the back of his chair. By the end of the day his tie would have dropped a couple of floors, the top button of his shirt would be open and his shirt sleeves would be rolled up just below his elbows.

She saw him glance at her desk, seeking evidence of a coffee mug. When he saw that she already had coffee he filled the mug labelled 'World's Best Taxi Driver', a present from his nineteen-year-old daughter.

His filing was not a system that anyone else understood but Kim had yet to request any piece of paper that was not in her hands within a few seconds. At the top of his desk was a framed picture of himself and his wife taken at their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. A picture of his daughter snuggled in his wallet.

D.S. Kevin Dawson, the third member of her team, didn't keep a photo of anyone special on his desk. Had he wanted to display a picture of the person for whom he felt most affection he would have been greeted by his own likeness throughout his working day.

'Sorry I'm late, Guv,' Dawson called as he slid into his seat opposite Wood and completed her team.

He wasn't officially late. The shift didn't start until eight a.m. but she liked them all in early for a briefing, especially at the beginning of a new case. Kim didn't like to stick to a roster and people who did lasted a very short time on her team.

'Hey, Stacey, you gonna get me a coffee or what?' Dawson asked, checking his mobile phone.

'Of course, Kev, how'd yer like it: milk, two sugars and in yer lap?' she asked sweetly, in her strong Black Country accent.

'Stace, would you like a coffee?' he asked, rising, knowing full well that she didn't touch the stuff. 'You must be tired after fighting warlocks all night,' he quipped, referring to Stacey's addiction to the online game World of Warcraft.

'Actually, Kev, I received a powerful spell from a high priestess that can turn a grown man into a raging dickhead – but looks like someone else got to yer first.'

Dawson held his stomach and offered mock-laughter.

‘Guv,’ Bryant called over his shoulder. ‘The kids are playing up again.’ He turned back to the two of them and wagged a finger. ‘You two just wait until your mother gets home.’

Kim rolled her eyes and sat at the spare desk, eager to begin. ‘OK, Bryant, hand out the statements. Kev, get the board.’

Dawson took the marker pen and stood next to the whiteboard that occupied the entire back wall.

While Bryant divided up the paperwork she talked through the events of earlier that morning.

‘Our victim is Teresa Wyatt, forty-seven years old, highly respected principal of a private boys’ school in Stourbridge. No marriage or children. Lived comfortably but not lavishly and had no enemies that we’re aware of.’

Kev noted the information as bullet points beneath the heading of ‘Victim’.

Bryant’s phone rang. He said little before replacing the receiver and nodding in Kim’s direction. ‘Woody wants you.’

She ignored him. ‘Kev, make a second heading, “Crime”. No murder weapon, no robbery, so far no forensics and no clues.

‘Next heading, “Motive”. People are normally murdered because of something they have done, something they are doing or something they are going to do. As far as we know, our victim was not engaged in any kind of dangerous activity.’

‘Err . . . Guv, the DCI wants you.’

Kim took another gulp of the fresh cuppa. ‘Trust me, Bryant, he likes me better when I’ve had coffee. Kev, the post-mortem is at ten. Stace, find out everything you can about our victim. Bryant, contact the school and let them know we’re coming.’

‘Guv . . .’

Kim finished her drink. ‘Calm down, Mum, I’m going.’

She took the stairs to the third floor two at a time and knocked lightly before entering.

DCI Woodward was a heavyset man in his mid-fifties. His mixed race origins gifted him smooth brown skin that travelled up and over his hairless head. His black trousers and white shirt were crisp and creased in all the right places. The reading glasses on the tip of his nose did little to disguise the tired eyes behind them.

He waved her in and pointed to a chair, giving her a full view of the glass cabinet holding his model car collection. The lower shelf housed a selection of classic British models but the upper shelf displayed a history of police vehicles used through the ages. There was an MG TC from the Forties, a Ford Anglia, a Black Maria and a Jaguar XJ40 that took pride of place at the centre.

To the right of the cabinet, fixed firmly to the wall, was a photograph of Woody shaking hands with Tony Blair. To the right of that was a photograph of his eldest son, Patrick, in full dress uniform, right before he was deployed to Afghanistan. He had been clothed in that exact same uniform for his burial fifteen months later.

Woody ended the phone conversation and immediately picked up the stress ball from the edge of his desk. His right hand clenched and relaxed around the clump of putty. Kim realised he reached for it a lot when she was around.

‘What do we have so far?’

‘Very little, Sir. We were just outlining the investigation when you summoned me.’

His knuckles whitened around the ball but he ignored the dig.

Her eyes wandered to the right of his ear, to his current project on the window sill. It was a Rolls Royce Phantom and construction had not progressed in days.

‘You had a run-in with Detective Inspector Wharton, I hear?’

So, the jungle drums had already been busy. ‘We exchanged pleasantries over the body.’

There was something about the model that didn’t look quite right. To her eye the wheel base looked much too long.

He squeezed the ball harder. ‘His DCI has been in touch. A formal complaint against you has been lodged and they want the case.’

Kim rolled her eyes. Couldn’t the weasel fight his own battles?

She fought the urge to reach across and pick up the Rolls Royce to rectify the mistake but she contained herself.

She slid her eyes along and met the gaze of her commanding officer. ‘But they’re not going to get it, are they, Sir?’

He held her gaze for a long minute. ‘No, Stone, they are not, however a formal complaint does not look good on your file and quite frankly I’m getting a little bit tired of receiving them.’ He swapped the ball to his left hand. ‘So, I’m curious to see who you’re buddying up with on this one.’

Kim felt like a child being asked to choose a new best friend. Her last performance review had highlighted only one area of improvement: playing nice with others.

‘Do I get a choice?’

‘Who would you choose?’

‘Bryant.’

The ghost of a smile hovered around his lips. 'Then yes, you get to choose.'

So, there was no choice at all, she thought. Bryant provided damage limitation and with the neighbouring force sniffing at her backside Woody wasn't taking any chances; he wanted her in the care of a responsible adult.

She had been on the cusp of offering her boss a little advice that would save him hours of dismantling the rear axle of the Rolls but quickly changed her mind.

'Anything else, Sir?'

Woody put the stress ball back and took off his glasses. 'Keep me updated.'

'Of course.'

'Oh, and Stone . . .'

She turned at the door. 'Let your team have some sleep now and again. They're not all charged via a USB port like you.'

Kim left his office, wondering how long it had taken Woody to come up with that little gem.