

ROGUE

by Bella D'Arcy Reed

Several people walking past the lock had seen her without noticing her: a girl standing by the sea wall looking out over the estuary. She wasn't really a girl, she just looked like one at that distance because of her long hair and thin body, she was, they found, forty-five.

'Natalie Ellis, Walthamstow – identified by her sister - came to Essex after a breakup with her boy-friend apparently.' DI Lester Davies of Chelmsford CID was holding the first team meeting after the body was found on the mud when the tide went out from Heybridge Basin late the previous night. 'Been staying with her sister in South Woodham Ferrars, who got worried and phoned the police just before midnight at about the same time the body was reported. Rob.'

DS Mayne got up to the screen and pressed buttons on the remote as he spoke.

'Injuries commensurate with falling, hitting the wooden posts on the sea-side of the lock, and, post-mortem, being smashed against the posts overnight. The body was stopped from floating out to sea because one leg was trapped by one of those posts. She could've just fallen, but there are small scratches and wounds on the face, head and hands. Scratches could've been self-inflicted, protecting herself when falling or from an attack. Smaller wounds, though, seem to be from an implement with a sharp point, shape of the wounds suggest a tool with a curved end. Death was actually by drowning, suggesting the tide was in when she fell. We were called after the body was seen by someone leaving the pub who'd gone up to the lock for some air.'

'Any other witnesses?'

DC Sandra Clarke replied 'Pete Daniels – owns a houseboat on a permanent mooring further up the canal. It was a grey day, windy, spitting rain and cold, so there weren't many visitors. Pub landlord said there were a few in for a drink and hot food, no-one he knew except Daniels. All Daniels remembers is seeing someone, tall and thin, looking out over the estuary as he went into the pub around 5pm. He said it was a woman because of her stance and her long hair. He can't recall seeing anyone when he came out, about 6.30pm'

'Why would she be standing out in the cold? Why not go into the pub?'

'Her car was found in the Daisy Meadow car park with her bag inside, so unless she took some loose cash, she wouldn't've been able to buy a drink. The car smelt of vinegar'

Rob read from a file 'Stomach contents show her last meal was fish and chips. She was identified by the owner of the chip shop in Bentalls Centre. He thought she was in late afternoon around 4.00-4.30pm.'

'She didn't eat them in the car?'

Rob shook his head. 'No, no wrappings, and none in the carpark wastebin.'

'So, she took the fish and chips down the canal path to eat them at the lock.'

'Strange she didn't eat in the car, given the weather.'

Sandra responded, 'Her sister, Sharon, said they used to live in Maldon, and be taken to the Basin when they were kids. Parents used to buy fish and chips and they'd eat them by the lock and watch the boats.'

'So, sentimental journey.' said Lester opening a folder. 'The boyfriend. James Attenborough, 44, plumber. Works for himself. Well-qualified according to his advert, several systems endorsements. Contact by mobile phone. Address - Colchester Rd, Walthamstow. Phone switched off, no-one at home. Mobile record shows he phoned her several times in the last couple of days. Nothing after 9pm day before we found her. He's our priority.

Rob, you liaise with the Met, find the boyfriend, bring him in for questioning. Get someone to make a list of all the tools a plumber would use and see if one matches the wounds. Sandra, you and I'll have another word with the sister about Natalie's relationship with Attenborough''

'Sir.' They rose from the table and set off in different directions.

James Attenborough was brought in, interviewed and kept in overnight. That evening, the results of his interview and the one with Sharon, Natalie's sister, were discussed.

'Attenborough denies being here, ever. He says Natalie left him last Thursday after a row, he didn't know where she went, but thought maybe to her sister's.' Rob reported

'Sharon says she arrived at about eleven on the Thursday.' Sandra added

'He says he kept calling her mobile, but she wasn't answering or it was switched off. He'd tried calling her at her sister's but was told first she wasn't there and then that she wouldn't speak to him. He says his phone was off yesterday because he was on a bathroom re-fit and didn't want to be disturbed'

'Phone off? Sounds a bit daft for a freelance' Lester said. 'Checked with the customer?'

Rob looked at his notes, 'Yes. Mrs Williams - said she let him in 8.15am then went to work. He'd gone when she got back.'

'So he could've got up here'

Rob nodded. 'Mrs Williams said work had been done but she'd no way of knowing how long it'd taken him. He says he left at 4.30pm, his usual end-time, went home and watched tv with a couple of cans. Says he forgot to switch on his phone until this morning.'

'What was the row about?'

'Kids. He wanted them to get married and have a family. She said she was too old for kids, and anyway, she was going for promotion. They quarrelled and she left.'

'Even if he left the Williams house at half past four, he could've still got up here by six' surmised Rob.

'Would she have stood out in the cold for that long?' objected Sandra 'besides there's nothing on her phone to suggest a tie-up, so he wouldn't have known where to come.'

'So he says. Anything on the tools?'

'We've got a list, and we've got his toolbox, and his van, so they'll be gone over by Forensics. We've got people on door-to-door in the Basin to see if anyone noticed the van.'

'Right. Tomorrow, we'll question him about his statement that he'd never been to Maldon or knew the lock.'

Lester looked at his watch. 'I'm going out to the Basin to watch the tide.'

The tide was high when Lester got to the Basin at 6pm, and the sun was setting, even though the murky, low cloud prevented that action from being seen. The cold air was heavy with rain, making his face wet within minutes, and the wind caused tinkles and rhythmic clacking of the shrouds and lines of the boats. Those on the sea-side of the lock were rocking up and down in slow agitation, waves slapping their sides. Lester looked down into the shivering, shifting blackness below, dismally malevolent. So different from low tide, when all there was to see was a rivulet quietly, innocently, snaking down its own shallow valley between ridges and flats of sand and mud.

He tried to imagine how the woman would have fallen over, being pushed, trying to save herself? Any cries or screams would have been masked by the weather sounds. He imagined the shock as her body hit the coldness of the water, her breath stopped by that and then knocked out of lungs hit by the solid, dark wooden posts. If she'd been unconscious, she'd not have had a chance, her leg caught as it was.

His gaze slid round. Whoever had attacked her could have come from several directions: the canal path from Heybridge, or from the village up the slope between the two pubs, or possibly along the seawall from Maldon or Goldhangar. He dismissed the seawall routes as unlikely, too far to walk. Pity the car park had no CCTV. He pulled up his collar and decided on a drink before going home. Murder or manslaughter. Tomorrow, they would get a confession from Attenborough, of that he was sure.

Across the estuary, as if watching Lester from the other side stood the murderer, rain falling down his neck. He had no recollection of the woman, of her hands protecting her face from him. He hadn't known her, she had been in his way. He hadn't pushed

her, she had fallen away from him, scattering chips. He had left her, had done nothing to help her.

He walked to the edge of the water his eyes on the ground as if searching for something. The water lapped against his feet as he stood in a pool of mud. A gull cried above him, then another. He looked up and watched them flying towards a boat where a woman was throwing something into the water. The gulls landed, shrieking, folding their wings over the water. They rocked on the waves and hassled each other for the food.

He gave a cry, lifted his wings and soared into the air to join them.