

Discovery – and danger

An extract from Laurence Watkinson's novel *Minority Rapport*, the third story in his crime series set in Blackpool, the crime-ridden casino city of the not-too-distant future.

Henry Middleton-Smith, leader of the BNP, is a suspect in a murder case – but have the police made a serious mistake? Is Middleton-Smith innocent, and is someone actually trying to kill him? Kate Brisket, a local newspaper reporter with a nose for trouble, has been writing about the recent troubles for the Evening Gazette, and this wintry evening she goes to interview the BNP leader at his luxurious bungalow overlooking North Shore Golf Course. But if Kate's in danger of finding out the truth, could she herself be the next victim?

It was about six o'clock when Kate Brisket stepped out of her car outside Henry Middleton-Smith's bungalow on Northgate. It was a dark evening, with big thick clouds blanking out any possible moon or starlight. But the clouds were high, so they didn't reflect much of the street light from the city. A damp southwesterly wind blew unhindered over the golf course opposite the row of expensive houses, and knocked Kate's hair about her face as she stood and locked her car door.

The rain had stopped but it was cold. Kate had expected to see a warm, inviting glow from Middleton-Smith's home, but as far as she could see there were no lights on.

Kate paused before she stepped into the driveway. She looked into the shadows cast by the street lamps. Shadows of bushes, wheelie bins, a Leyland cypress. She looked into them and into the corners made by the garden fence and the garage; the garage and the passage which separated it from the house; the porch; the steps down the tiered front garden. She leaned forward slightly, peeked behind the front garden wall. No reason not to proceed.

Her footsteps sounded somehow louder on the wet concrete of his driveway than they should.

Kate could see now that the darkness emanating from the front windows wasn't caused by the thickness of Henry Middleton-Smith's velvet curtains. The curtains were open. There was no light showing at all.

Damn, she thought, he's out.

And at the same time, something inside her was glad. Daft as it sounded, things seemed a bit... well, spooky.

She peered in through the bay window. As far as she could see, doors were open inside and no light showed from any of the other rooms.

She'd have to come back tomorrow. Well, she was glad to be able to clock off. It had been a long day once again.

But something in her reporter's instinct – or something, anyway, in what she thought of as her reporter's instinct – told her to follow this through.

She walked back to the car for her torch.

Fishing the torch out of the glove compartment, and checking the batteries, she thought: Come on, Kate. Go home. Hot bath beckons. Lavender oil, candles, glass of wine, a good novel. Soak. Then bed. Mmmm.

Then she thought: Go and finish the job. That's why you have a reporter's instinct. To prompt you when you think something looks odd.

It was indefinable, like being able to tell from outside that the burglar alarm wasn't set, or something.

She stepped out of the car and walked quietly back up the drive.

Kate stood in front of the gate that blocked the passage between the house and the garage.

And that was it. The gate. The padlock.

The padlock was on the gate. And the padlock was open.

That's what she had noticed was wrong. It just hadn't penetrated her conscious mind until the second time she saw it.

And that's what told her she shouldn't be here. She shouldn't be here if something was wrong. She must leave now.

Kate removed the padlock, hung it with a tiny clink on the black ironwork, opened the gate and walked through.

She thought: Kate. There is a story here.

She thought: Kate. You should not be here.

The combination of those two things was so exciting. It was like the awakening of an illicit passion.

She approached the side door, the door that led into the kitchen. Knowing, just knowing, it would be unlocked.

Kate took several steadying breaths before she tried the door.

It was locked.

But so what? She carried on slowly past the kitchen. Around the corner. The kitchen windows had blinds. The blinds were closed. No lights inside.

She came to the master bedroom, right at the back of the bungalow. Overlooking the huge garden. Literally overlooking it, because the curtains were open. And so was the top part of the window. It was a midwinter evening and the curtains should definitely be closed, and the window should most definitely be locked, and there should be a light showing from somewhere inside the bungalow, and it was so obvious something was wrong. So obvious and so, God, so thrilling.

A light from somewhere behind the house was reflecting on the window, so Kate couldn't see through into the darkness. She put her face right up to the glass and cupped her hands over her brow.

She could feel her heart beating. Steady, expectant thumps, faster than usual. She could see a dark shape on the bed. It didn't look like anything but a blob. In fact the dark blob seemed to merge with the bed.

She switched on her torch.

At first Kate couldn't tell it was a person. Not from this angle, with the person lying across the bed, with their head towards the window. And the shape of the person's upper body, a dark shape against a light quilt, was distorted because it merged with a dark patch on the quilt itself.

Now, in the circle of torchlight, Kate could see the top half of the dark shape was the top half of a person in a dark waistcoat. The person was on his back, with his head towards her. The outer parts of the dark shape were in fact a widely-spread pool of dark red on the quilt.

About two seconds after she had switched on the torch, the picture became very clear to Kate. She was looking at a man who had been somehow spiked onto the bed. There seemed to be something protruding from his belly, but clearly it also went into his body.

Through his body. His hands rested on the part that stuck up from his abdomen.

He was pinned there like a specimen insect. Like one of the collection of British butterflies that Henry Middleton-Smith had hung on the wall in his vestibule.

Kate Brisket had been wrong. She'd been certain no other development could have superseded her exclusive on the secret affair behind the conspiracy charge. Well, here was such a development.

Judging by the size of the dark red pool on the quilt, the man on the bed had bled to death. His head lay to one side, and seemed to be stretching towards the window. Kate couldn't see the face, but she knew to whom it belonged.

Two-and-a-half seconds after she had switched on the torch, Kate felt an incredible rush of adrenaline...

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