

THE NATIONAL CRIMINOLOGY  
CONFERENCE, PORTSMOUTH  
SQUARE, SAN FRANCISCO

Life is never what it seems. You think you have it all figured out and then reality shimmers into an entirely different truth.

That's what the shocked face of the dead man seemed to say. He sprawled there, frozen in time, across the big screen at the front of the lecture theatre. It was an old photo, very old in fact — black and white with blurred edges — but you could still see that he'd died with a question in his eyes. A deadly serious one.

Whatever it was — it hadn't been spoken. His throat had been slit.

'The body was found at dawn, in late 1867, on the San Francisco docks ...' Professor Stanley Wauhope studied the screen behind him with deep satisfaction. As though the murder victim was his own private trophy.

It was an eerie sight. The criminology professor and his long-dead subject almost seemed to exchange a glance. As though the corpse was appealing to the professor for the answer that'd never come.

Professor Wauhope turned back to the audience with a pompous smirk. He was thoroughly convinced he had knowledge that even the dead wanted. 'The old San Francisco docks were a brisk ten-minute walk from where we are now in Portsmouth Square. Our subject had arrived in San Francisco from Boston the day before. His was the third body found in that same spot, killed in that exact way, in that same week in 1867. All three victims had just arrived in San Francisco and they all knew each other. They were bankers, in town for a meeting with the mayor.'

Professor Wauhope was the key speaker at the National Criminology Conference because of his speciality — cold cases. His favourites were usually very cold indeed. At least one hundred years cold.

That was why I was here.

Or rather, why the National Time Administration had forced me to come. They saw it as good publicity.

'This cluster of murders is just one of thousands of cold cases that took place in the rough dives and seedy back alleys of this very neighbourhood ...' mused Wauhope with delight. 'Our shiny new conference building is sitting in the very district that was once considered the most dangerous den of iniquity in the Western world. Every worst sort of human degradation and depravity was practised here.' He chuckled. 'And from all reports with a great deal of creativity and vigour.'

I didn't laugh with the rest. Wauhope seemed to relish his grisly subject matter a little too intimately for my taste.

‘The neighbourhood in which you are now was known as the Barbary Coast, a sullied remnant of the old Wild West ...’ His voice had deepened with excitement. ‘This is the very place where the Wild West met the equally Wild Seas — where the renegades of the land frontier met the renegades of the ocean ...’

The audience full of lounging, out-of-shape academics shifted in anticipation. Lawless chaos, old or new, caught their attention.

‘Thirsting to make their fortunes in the California Gold Rush of the mid-nineteenth century, wagon trains hurried westwards and ships of all kinds and allegiances flooded in from the east. There were so many that San Francisco’s harbour became choked with hundreds of vessels, abandoned by their crews who headed for the Gold Fields. And, of course,’ Wauhope gave a gleeful smile, ‘with this massive influx came the jackals, ready to strip the scurrying herd of their gold nuggets.’

There were a few appreciative chuckles.

I scanned the audience with revulsion. Old suffering is still suffering. My job had taught me that in intimate detail.

Professor Wauhope nodded at the corpse on the big screen behind him. ‘By the time this man met his fate on the docks, the murder rate was so high that cemeteries had become the fastest growing real-estate developments in boom-town San Francisco. Even the most hardened sailors, who’d sailed into every foul port of call in the world, were afraid of this neighbourhood. They called it the Barbary Coast after the most successful predators of them all: the Corsairs. They’d been white slavers, operating off the Barbary Coast in North Africa, until they were attracted here by the rich pickings. The Corsairs

terrorised San Francisco, ruling the underworld for nearly two decades.’

Wauhope looked up at the dead man’s shocked face, his own a mask of smug self-congratulation. ‘Yes, the Corsairs have provided me with a lifetime of cold-case research; a lifetime of unpicking their every move —’

Cornelius Klaasen gave a loud snort of disgust. He sat just one seat away. The snort was loud enough to make the whole audience turn and scowl. Klaasen was bored and didn’t care who knew it. The National Time Administration had ordered him to attend the conference just as they had me. But he wasn’t going quietly.

The criminology professor swung a malicious glance over Klaasen and said, each word dripping sarcasm, ‘But who knows for how much longer my hard work will be appreciated? Unfortunately it now looks like I’ll be put out of a job by the NTA.’

At that the scowls deepened.

Wauhope, sensing the suitably frigid mood of his audience, bared his teeth in a mock smile. ‘Before I continue, perhaps I should introduce our three special guests ...’

Like NASA and the space program, the National Time Administration was a mega science project initiated in the 1950s as part of the Cold War technology race. When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961 he made the projects his own, declaring that he’d push the new frontiers of space and time travel to the outer limits of human ingenuity. So the money rain began.

The first time portal was completed in the early 1960s and the NTA’s equivalent of astronauts, the

Time Marshals, began to perform official government investigations.

Professor Wauhope studied us with a sour mixture of derision and jealousy. ‘For the whole history of the NTA, Time Marshals have been the only personnel able to access the portal, and strictly only for purposes in the national interest. That meant the mysteries of the past — the great criminal cases; the secrets of history — were left to us academics. That is, until last year, when the NTA bowed to public opinion and began training our special guests. Please rise and take a bow.’

The three of us rose, suspicious but with smiles equally as fake as Wauhope’s plastered on our faces.

The audience scanned us — searching for flaws.

‘As you all know, today we are honoured with the presence of the only private investigators ever licensed to use the time portal. Mr Cornelius Klaasen, Mr Edward Melnick ... and Miss Kannon Dupree.’

When he got to my name at the end, Wauhope arched a mocking brow, as though he couldn’t believe I’d made it through the brutal training period. No one could — including the NTA. There’d been a lot more trainees at the start, but we’d been whittled down, by one harsh means or another, to just the three of us.

I’d had to turn myself inside out to stay in the program. But I’d made it just the same.

There was a sprinkling of polite applause, which died too quickly. They all saw us as the overpaid, underqualified competition.

Klaasen, to my right, ground his arctic-white bleached teeth.

The three of us were here for one reason only. The NTA had ordered us. They controlled the use of the

portal and all of our missions would go to them for approval. In other words — as they liked to remind us — they owned our arses.

‘Now, because of these newly graduated Time Investigators, all our deepest, darkest secrets can be revealed. Well, those beyond the thirty-year curfew from the present at any rate ...’ He rolled his eyes as though that limitation made us less than useless.

The audience tittered.

I just ignored it. It’d been the politicians who’d made and enforced that curfew. Guess they all had too many secrets to hide.

‘And,’ Wauhope made no attempt to cover his sarcasm, ‘for a small fee, of course ...’

The audience tittered again, delighted to have the opportunity to express their disdain. Everyone knew that the NTA was charging enormous fees for the use of the portal.

I sat. No use standing there like a convenient target. Melnick and Klaasen followed, seething at Wauhope’s needling.

‘Bloody academic,’ croaked Eddie Melnick, beside me. ‘He’s never put his life on the line trying to solve anything.’

Cornelius Klaasen leant over his buddy to get to me. ‘At least we’ve got clients though ... eh, kid?’

My baby-face wasn’t always an asset in this business.

My business partner called me a ‘wolf in lamb’s clothing’ — said my targets never saw me coming. But these two used it to discredit me. Hence the put-down nickname. The Kid.

I ignored Klaasen and tried to follow the professor. He might actually say something that could make this wasted day useful.

‘Yeah, Dupree,’ persisted Klaasen. ‘I hear you can’t even afford an office?’

Melnick sniggered.

It tortured both of them to have to share the spotlight with someone like me. Young and female.

Out of the side of my mouth I said, ‘Now, Cornelius, just because the good professor has made you — and your sidekick, Eddie — feel like your dicks are too small, doesn’t mean you have to show them to me for confirmation.’

It didn’t help Klaasen’s ego that I, a mere female, was two inches taller than him. He couldn’t stomach having to look up to me.

I may only be twenty-three but too many years in the school of hard knocks meant Professor Wauhope hadn’t raised a bristle on me. Cornelius Klaasen and Eddie Melnick, both long-time big shots in the detective game, just couldn’t take the needling any more.

I changed the subject. ‘At least I don’t have to be rescued, boys.’

That shut Klaasen up.

He’d had to be retrieved in his final training mission through the time portal. A rescue team had been sent in and he’d almost been kicked out of the training program for it. Only his buddies in the NTA had managed to help him make it to graduation.

I grinned.

I usually reminded him of it when I was standing right next to him.