All Fall Down

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Extract

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1

Charlotte, North Carolina
January, 2000

The closet was small, cramped. Too warm. Dark save for the sliver of dim light from the bedroom beyond. In it, Death waited. Patiently. Without movement or complaint.

Tonight was the night. Soon, the man would come. And like the others, he would pay.

For crimes unpunished. Against the weak. Against those the world had turned their backs on. Death had planned carefully, had left nothing to chance. The woman was away, the children with her. Far away, in the loving and protective arms of family.

From another part of the house came a sound—a thud, then an oath. A door slammed. Excited, Death pressed closer to the door, peering through the narrow space, taking in the scene beyond: the unmade bed, the dirty laundry strewn about, the trash that littered the floor.

The man stumbled into the room, toward the bed, obviously inebriated. Immediately, the small dark space filled with the smell of cigarettes and

booze—booze he and his buddies had consumed that night. Laughing. Thumbing their noses at the gods. At justice.

He lost his balance and knocked into the bedside table. The lamp toppled and crashed to the floor. The man fell face first onto the bed, head turned to the side, foot and arm hanging off.

Minutes ticked past. The drunk's breathing became deep and thick. Soon, his guttural snores filled the room. The snores of a man in an alcohol-induced coma, of one who would not awake easily.

Until it was too late.

The time had come.

Death eased out of the closet and crossed to the bed, stopping beside it and gazing down in disgust. Smoking in bed was dangerous. It was foolhardy. One should never tempt fate that way. But then, this was a stupid man. One who had not learned from his mistakes. The kind of man the world would be better off without.

With the toe of a shoe, Death eased the bedside wastebasket to the spot under the drunk's dangling hand. The cigarette was the man's brand; the matches from the bar he had frequented that night. The match flared with the first strike of tip against the friction strip; the flame crackled as it kissed the tobacco, hissing as it caught.

With a small, satisfied smile, Death dropped the glowing cigarette into the filled wastebasket, then turned and walked away.

2

Charlotte, North Carolina
Wednesday, March 1, 2000

Officer Melanie May hovered just beyond the motel room's door, gaze riveted to the bed inside, to the murder victim bound by ankles and wrists to the bed frame.

The young woman was naked. She lay faceup, her eyes open, her mouth sealed with silver duct tape. The blood had flown from her face and the top of her body, downward toward her back, pooling there, giving those areas a ruddy, bluish cast. Rigor mortis appeared to be complete, which meant she had been dead at least eight hours.

Melanie took a shaky step forward. Chief Greer's call had interrupted her morning shower. A towel clutched to her chest, she'd had to ask him to repeat himself three times. Not only had there not been a homicide in Whistlestop since she joined the force three years ago, as she understood it, there had *never* been a homicide in the tiny community, located on the outskirts of Charlotte.

He had ordered her to the Sweet Dreams Motel, ASAP.

First order of business had been arranging care for her four-year-old son, Casey. That done, she had hurriedly donned her uniform, strapped on her gun belt and pulled her still-wet, shoulder-length blond hair back into a severe twist. She had speared in the last bobby pin just as the doorbell pealed, announcing that her neighbor had arrived to watch Casey.

Now, not quite twenty minutes later, she was staring in horror at her first murder victim and praying she didn't puke.

To steady herself, she shifted her gaze to the room's other occupants. From the number of them, it appeared she was the last to make the scene. Her partner, Bobby Taggerty—his rail-thin frame and shock of bright red hair making him look like a walking matchstick—was photographing the scene. Her chief stood in the corner of the room, engaged in a heated discussion with two men she recognized as homicide investigators with the Charlotte/Mecklenburg force. Outside, keeping the Whistlestop PD first officers company, were two Charlotte/Mecklenburg uniforms. A man she didn't recognize—but whom she assumed was also CMPD, probably on the forensics team—squatted beside the bed, examining the corpse.

What was the CMPD doing here already? Melanie wondered, frowning. And why in such great numbers? Sure, the WPD was a tiny force operating within the large area serviced by the CMPD—a department of fourteen hundred sworn officers and state-of-the-art facilities, including a crime lab. And sure, her force had an interagency aid agreement

with the bigger department. But still, protocol demanded an initial WPD investigation followed by a Whistlestop request for aid.

This was no ordinary murder. Something big had gone down.

And she wasn't about to be muscled out. Even by muscles as impressive as the CMPD's.

Determined to assert that fact, Melanie strode across the threshold, stopping short as the stench of the room hit her. Not from decomposition, which had not yet begun, but with the evacuation of bladder and bowel that sometimes occurred with violent death.

Melanie brought a hand to her nose, stomach heaving. She squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed hard. She couldn't throw up, not in front of the CMPD guys. They already thought the Whistlestop force was rinky-dink, made up of wannabes and couldn't-hack-its. She wasn't about to prove them right—even if she agreed with their assessment.

''Hey, you? Sweetpants.'' Melanie opened her eyes. The man beside the bed motioned her forward, his expression disgusted. ''You going to fall apart or get your ass in here and do a job? I could use a hand.''

From the corners of her eyes she saw her chief and the investigators glance her way, and, annoyed, she crossed to the man. ''The name's May. Officer May. Not 'Hey You' or 'Sweetpants.'''

''Whatever.'' He handed her a pair of latex gloves. ''Put those on and come down here.''

She snatched the gloves from his hand, pulled

them on, then knelt beside him. ''You have a name?''

''Parks.''

When he spoke, she caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath. From that and the looks of him, she decided this murder had dragged him away from one hell of a binge. ''CMPD?''

''FBI.'' He made a sound of impatience. ''Can we get started now? Chickie here's not getting any fresher.''

Melanie didn't hide her surprise or her dislike of Parks, though he appeared to care less what she thought of him. ''What do you need me to do?''

''See that? Under her ass?'' He indicated the shiny tip of something peeking out from beneath the body. ''I'm going to hoist her up. I need you to get it for me.''

She nodded, understanding. Although the victim had not been a large woman, death would make her difficult to maneuver, even for a man built as strongly as Parks. With a grunt of exertion, he inched the victim's hindquarters off the mattress. Melanie grabbed the shiny scrap—a foil condom wrapper, open and empty.

Parks took the packet from her hands and examined it a moment, eyebrows drawn together in thought. Melanie watched him, wondering why he was at the scene. Why had this victim's murder rated not only the representation of two police forces but also the FBI?

He lifted his bloodshot gaze to hers. ''You got any idea what happened here, May? Got a good guess?''

''Judging by the bluish tint to her skin and the lack of any visible wound, I suspect she was smothered. Probably with a bed pillow.'' She pointed to the one just to the left of the woman's head. ''Beyond that, not yet.''

''Read the scene. Everything we need to know is right here.'' He indicated the skimpy lingerie draped over the chair and the empty champagne bottle on the floor. ''See those? They tell me she came to play. Nobody forced her into this room or onto this bed.''

''And being tied up was part of the fun and games?''

''In my opinion, yes. Think about it. There are no visible bruises on her body. It would take a lot of strength to tie a struggling adult prone to a bed. Even a huge man couldn't do it without exerting extreme force on the victim. Also, check out her wrists and ankles. They're in almost perfect condition. They'd be torn up if she'd fought for long.''

Melanie did as he suggested and saw that he was right. There were only slight burns from the ropes, ones indicative of a short struggle.

''This guy's in his late twenties to mid-thirties. Handsome. If he's not successful, he looks like he is. He's going to drive an expensive car, something foreign. Sporty. A BMW or Jag.''

Melanie made a sound of disbelief. ''There's no way you can know that.''

''No? Take a look at the victim. This girl wasn't just any skank. She was a babe. Young, gorgeous, rich. The best family, the best—''

''Wait a minute,'' Melanie interrupted. ''Who is she?''

''Joli Andersen. Cleve Andersen's youngest daughter.''

''Son of a bitch,'' Melanie muttered. Now she understood. The Andersens were one of Charlotte's oldest and most influential families. They were big into banking, politics and on the boards of a number of Charlotte's most visible civic and charitable organizations. Melanie didn't doubt that Cleve Andersen had a direct line to both the mayor's and governor's office.

''That's why you're here,'' she said. ''And the CMPD honchos. Because she's an Andersen.''

''Bingo. With a vic like this one, word always travels fast. Housekeeper finds the body and, after screaming, runs for the motel manager. First thing he does is check chickie's ID. Then the scenario gets really interesting. He panics and calls the CMPD and tells the dispatcher not only what's gone down, but who's dead. Next thing I know, my butt's being hauled out of bed to lend aid and offer expertise.''

Melanie absorbed his words. ''So, the family already knows?''

''Hell, yes. Before you or your chief did, Sweetpants.'' He returned his attention to his analysis of the scene. ''The chain of events only underscores my theory. This girl was accustomed to the best of everything. No way she was going slumming with some gas-station attendant.''

''What about drugs? Or rebellion from her parents?''

''There's no sign of drug use here. As for rebellion, look at the way she dressed, her Z3 parked outside, her history. It doesn't fit.''

Melanie frowned, recalling the things she had read about the Andersens' youngest daughter, acknowledging that he was right. ''So why'd she go to a motel room with some guy she didn't know?''

''Who said she didn't know him?''

Melanie shifted her gaze to Joli Andersen's once-beautiful face, now frozen in death, to her wide-open, terrified gaze, imagining the girl's last moments. ''And then he killed her.''

''Yes. But he didn't plan to. My bet is, she began to complain when the game turned unpleasant. Or maybe he couldn't get it up and she began to belittle him or laugh. This guy's the classic inadequate, her criticism would have sent him over the edge. He taped her mouth to shut her up, but then she began to struggle in earnest. That upset him more. She wasn't acting the way she was supposed to, the way he had imagined it in his head. So he presses a pillow over her face to get her to shut up and behave.''

''If he didn't plan it, how come the tape?'' Melanie shook her head. ''In my book, that's coming prepared.''

''I didn't say he hadn't acted out this scene before. He no doubt has, dozens of times, and some of those times with hookers. Understand, this is like a play he's written in his head, one he keeps adding to, fine-tuning. The beautiful girl. The rope. Her submission. The tape. And tonight, the murder. Ask

around with the professional girls, somebody will turn up who knows this guy.''

Melanie gazed at him, half-awed, half-disbelieving. Though his analysis all made sense, it seemed to her that he would have to be psychic to know all he professed to. ''Don't you think what you're doing is a little bit dangerous? Basically, you're just guessing.''

''What do you think police work is? Educated guessing, following gut instincts. Luck. Besides, I'm a damn good guesser.'' He glanced over his shoulder, holding up the foil packet. ''Any of you come across a used rubber?''

No one had. One of the CMPD guys ambled over. He took the packet and held it up, squinting at the small print on the front. ''Lambskin.'' He shook his head, making a sound of disgust. ''You'd think these people would have gotten the message by now. Only latex protects.''

Parks frowned. ''I doubt he had sex with her. Not the kind of sex he'd need a condom for.''

''No? The packet's open, right? Rubber's missing.'' The CMPD honcho dropped the packet into an evidence bag, sealed and marked it. ''He probably took it with him. Or flushed it.''

Parks shook his head. ''She brought the condom, not him.''

The investigator arched his eyebrows. ''How do you figure?''

''The last thing on his mind was protection. Look at this place, he made no attempt to clean up. I can see fingerprints on the champagne bottle from here.''

''So?''

''So,'' Parks continued, ''why would this disorganized inadequate flush a used condom but leave his fingerprints? My bet is, this place is swimming in biological and trace evidence.''

While Parks repeated his theory to the investigator, Melanie examined the area around the bed, careful not to inadvertently disturb or destroy evidence. She had a hunch. If Joli had brought the condom and the killer hadn't used it, she would bet it was still on or around the bed, just as the packet had been.

Her hunch paid off, and Melanie held up the still-coiled condom. ''This what you boys were looking for?'' When the two men looked at her, she grinned. ''The space between the mattress and the frame. You might check it out next time.''

Parks smiled; the investigator looked irritated and snatched it from her. ''He never even got around to fucking her. Sick bastard.''

''He got around to it all right,'' Parks countered, standing and yanking off his gloves. ''He just didn't do it with his penis. Check her body cavities. I wouldn't doubt he left something behind. Hairbrush. Comb. Car keys. If you're really lucky, they'll be his.''

Melanie stared at him, mouth dry, the horror of his words sinking in. For the last minutes she had been able to focus on the job, not the crime. She had been able to forget that the victim they were talking so dispassionately about had been, only hours before, a living, breathing human being; a

person who'd had hopes, fears and dreams, just like she did.

She couldn't pretend anymore.

Hand to her mouth, Melanie jumped to her feet and sprinted from the room. She made it as far as the first parked car, a white Ford Explorer. Hand on the vehicle's left front panel for support, she doubled over and puked.

Parks came up behind her. He held out a wad of toilet paper. ''You okay?''

''Fine.'' She took the tissue and wiped her mouth, totally humiliated. ''Thanks.''

''Your first stiff?''

She managed a yes, not meeting his eyes.

''Tough luck, her getting whacked in Whistlestop. A couple blocks over and you would have avoided all this unpleasantness.''

She looked at him then. ''Are you always this awful?''

''Pretty much.'' A ghost of a smile touched his mouth, then disappeared. ''It's nothing to be embarrassed about, you know. Some people just aren't cut out for this type of work.''

''People like me, you mean? The kind of cop the Whistlestop force was made for?''

''I didn't say that.''

''You didn't have to.'' She straightened, furious, sickness forgotten. ''You don't know anything about me. You don't have a clue what's right for me or what I can or cannot handle.''

''You're right, I don't. And let's keep it that way, shall we?''

Without another word, he climbed into the Explorer, started it and drove away.