

As Darkness Falls

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Extract

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BRONWYN
PARRY

PROLOGUE

No, not this.

Detective Sergeant Isabelle O'Connell dragged up every ounce of self-discipline to halt the cry of denial, and it lodged, unsounded, in her throat. She closed her eyes against the sight as tears that couldn't be shed scalded her eyelids.

Nearby, her colleagues cleared their throats, muttered curses, avoided looking at each other.

The heavy mantle of failure kept them all quiet. Seven days, the child had been missing. Seven long, hellish days and nights of searching and hoping and feverishly following any prospect of a lead, no matter how weak, desperately trying to find some trace of her.

And now this.

The fact of the girl's small body, dumped in a hollow in front of them, was horrific enough. But the single gunshot

to the head that had killed her was clearly less than twenty-four hours old. She'd been alive for at least six of those days, and they'd failed to find her. They'd failed *her*.

Superintendent Barrington pulled himself together first. 'I'd better go and inform the parents,' he said, his voice gruff and constrained. 'Detective Fraser, get Forensics up here, now. You two,' he indicated two of the uniformed police, 'secure the scene. Nobody, but nobody, is to touch a thing until they get here. O'Connell, you'll come with me.'

Isabelle stifled the instinct to run and nodded mutely. As senior female officer on the case, of course she had to accompany him for the nightmare task. Ten years on the job, and each time it became worse, not easier. This time, she knew the parents, had grown up beside them in this small town. Somehow she had to find the courage to face them and deliver this news. Somehow tell Sara, whom she'd sat beside in fifth grade, that her only child was dead.

Cope with it. You have to do this.

Despite the orders, no one moved.

Steve Fraser, his face flushed, burst out angrily, 'Sir, shouldn't we haul in that bastard Chalmers again? This is just like that other kid. There's got to be something we can hold him on.'

Barrington fixed the sergeant with a cold stare. 'Evidence, Fraser. If you find me one shred of evidence that connects him with this murder, we'll arrest and charge him. But to date all you've given me is innuendo, gossip, and the fact that he was tried and acquitted on a similar case two years ago. That is not evidence. And I have so far seen absolutely

no reason why Chalmers should be under any more suspicion than anyone else in this town.'

'But he's so weird, sir,' Fraser persisted, reckless in his challenge. 'Everyone thinks he did it.'

Isabelle braced for Barrington's explosion, but the superintendent just sighed wearily. 'Being weird is not a crime, Fraser, and the prejudices of a town are not the basis for thorough police investigation.'

Barrington sat, tense and silent, in the passenger seat as Isabelle drove the short distance back into town. Only as she pulled up in front of the modest home where the girl's parents lived did he speak.

'When we've finished here, O'Connell, you should go and warn Chalmers. Fraser's partly right – half the town does think he did it, and they'll be baying for his blood.'

'Protection arrangements, sir?' she asked, dragging her mind to practical needs to keep away the dread of the task to come.

'If he wants it. Use your judgment.'

She switched off the engine, and her fingers fumbled as she unbuckled her seat belt. Barrington made no move, his face white.

'I'm a week from retirement, O'Connell,' he muttered. 'This isn't the way I wanted to finish.'

She saw a curtain flick in the window, knew she had to move frozen limbs out of the car and do the unthinkable. Mitch and Sara had to come first. Later – much later, when

duty had been done and whoever had committed this crime arrested – she'd maybe have the luxury of time to give in, to weep and grieve. Not now.

'No, sir. We have to go, sir.'

The door jerked open as they mounted the steps, and there could be no escaping the terrible, inevitable moment when all hope and light drained from Sara's eyes, in that instant when she knew, before the words were spoken, before Mitch howled like no man should have to, before Sara folded in on herself and crumpled to the floor.

Because she'd failed them.

Isabelle barely managed to hold herself together, focusing on their needs, doing her job. If she allowed herself to feel, the fragile shell of self-control would crack into a million useless pieces.

Cope with it.

After they finally left the house, she drove the superintendent back to the tiny police station and forced herself to continue to her next duty. An eerie, uncomfortable quiet hung over the town. In the main street, people stood in groups, shaking heads, dabbing at tears, sniffing in handkerchiefs.

They stared at her as she drove past, their eyes critical, accusing, and neither heart nor intellect could begrudge them that judgment. A child lay dead, and she and her colleagues had not been able to prevent it.

Once, long ago, Isabelle had been a part of this small, isolated community. They'd welcomed her back a week ago,

trusting her as one of their own amongst the strangers in the rest of the police team – the very reason the superintendent had brought her in on this case. Yet after this terrible failure, any friendliness, any welcome they might have had for her, would be gone.

Just do your job, O’Connell, she ordered herself, crushing back the emotion that choked her throat. There’s a killer out there to find.

During the twenty-minute drive to Dan Chalmers’ secluded shack, she kept a bare grip on her sanity by methodically reviewing the facts of the case in her mind, seeking a clue, a lead, anything they might have missed. Like the superintendent, she believed in Chalmers’ innocence. The man was certainly strange, a true eccentric, but he had consistently and quietly denied any knowledge of the child’s disappearance, and she sensed his honesty. This was the second time that human nature’s distrust of difference had singled him out, yet he’d been resigned to the questions, cooperating with their enquiries fully.

As the car rounded a bend in the rough track and the shack came into view amongst the trees, a groan escaped her lips and her pulse skittered unevenly. There were vehicles there already, and a small crowd had gathered. Their angry yells disturbed the bush landscape, and in a glance she recognised that the emotional temperature was rising, fast. Someone picked up a rock and hurled it through the window, to the cheers of the others.

She radioed for backup before leaving the car, aware even as she did so that it would take too long to arrive. Apprehension roiled in her stomach. This would be one hell of a situation to defuse, and she'd have to do it herself.