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Burning Bridges As We go

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Death by Deli

They found the girl dead, lying on her back in the alley behind Carmichael's Deli with half a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a wax paper wrapped dill pickle clutched in the other. Young girl, face up, clothing intact and (hopefully) no signs of assault. An actual mystery since there appeared no immediate or discernible reason why she should be dead. She even looked unnatural being dead – like any minute she'd sit up, smile, and laugh at how good her joke was. "Fooled you," she'd say. But she didn't. Because her motionless face, pale and devoid of blood, dead eyes wide open, mouth slightly ajar, were trapped looking off into the distance for someone who wouldn't be coming.

"Hey, will you look at that," Detective Andy Truman remarked. "She looks just like Crime Scene Charlie -- "*Crime Scene Charlie*" being the popular chalk outline every CSI-watching Joe and Jane Public actually thought was drawn around the body at every crime scene with one arm up and one down in classic "swimmer's pose." "You don't think somebody's having a goof with us, do you? Posing her body that way. I ain't never seen anyone dead actually lying like that at a crime scene before."

"No, it's just coincidence," replied Detective Dan Sands -- the lead detective assigned to the case not less than an hour earlier. "It happens on occasion. Plus Phillips knows what he's doing. He wouldn't mess around like that."

Phillips. Patrol Officer John Phillips from Dorchester C11 who'd been first on scene and knew better than to fuck up by tromping over everything looking for clues. Just throw tape across the front of the alley and shut it down till investigations showed up. No one in, no one out.

"Only that fella there been inside since I got here," Phillips explained to the detectives pointing at the man sitting in the back of his patrol car. "Said his name is Vito Bailey and that he works at the Carmicheal. And that he found the girl dead just like she lay when he walked through the alley this morning on his way to work."

"Through the back alley?" Sands asked.

"Yeah, that's what he said. Said he goes through the back to open up the shop every morning and nearly tripped over her. Been emotional about it ever since. Not many in this neighborhood would be. But he is. He even called 911 immediately and waited with her till we arrived. Not many in this neighborhood would do that either."

"Thanks, Phillips." Truman replied. "You might be right about that."

At the moment, Vito Bailey was puking his guts out the open car back door of the patrol car while simultaneously blowing snot bubbles -- apologizing in between breaths cause he'd never seen a dead body in person before.

"Poor girl," Sands sympathized, standing over the body, looking down and scowling.

"Whaddya think the cause of death will be? Death by hoagie?"

"Could be," laughed Truman. "Man, I know one thing -- I wish my pickle looked as big as that one does in her hand."

Humor was a big part of the job. For bonding and comradery sure. But also because only cops who faced the horrors of society daily understood the consequences of what it

was like to face the horrors of society daily. No one meant any disrespect by it. It was just a way to dispel the tension, which could cloud the mind with fear if left to build up.

“Shame about wasting that whiskey though,” Truman suggested. “That’s Glen Fiddich 50 if I’m reading the label correctly. Rarely seen around these parts. Goes for easily two fifty, maybe three a shot. They definitely don’t stock that at McSorley’s I can tell you that.”

“Two dollars and fifty cents doesn’t sound like too much for a shot of whiskey,” Sands responded, “I know a few places midtown’ll charge you ten per.”

“No, my friend. That’s two HUNDRED and fifty buckerin’os per shot. That’s top shelf liquor she’s holding right there. Around twelve hundred for the entire bottle.”

“No kidding! Well then what’s this poor girl doing with such a thing? She’s what, maybe nineteen? Way too young to afford top shelf. Plus, I thought all they drank was Jägermeister at that age. Or peppermint schnapps or whatever.”

“They drink whatever comes their way. To them drunk is drunk. Just put the drink in their hand and they’ll swallow. Still, that’s some really good whiskey. What do ya’ figure? We empty the bottle to preserve the prints, but since there ain’t much evidentiary value to the liquid inside, maybe we dispose of it in a more organic way? It’d sure be nice to get a taste. No sense wasting it, right? What do you say?”

“We’ll book them both. There might be tranquilizers or roofies in the whiskey.”

“Not likely.”

“You never know. Either way, we’ll book every last drop too, you hear me?!”

“Spoil sport.”

"You take her for a local? Or maybe a working girl? A working girl with a pissed off pimp?" Sands asked, changing the subject before Truman got any further ideas. "Or maybe she got herself a high end client easily prone to angry outbursts?"

"Naw. No way she's a working girl. Way too clean. And those clothes definitely don't say hooker or townie. I mean who pairs purple pants with green sneakers and an oversized brown sweatshirt around here? My guess is she's a visitor to our fair city who probably wandered away from her tourist group and got herself lost and in trouble."

"Any chance she's a runaway? Or that this is a domestic? Maybe someone's already missing her and filed a missing person report? That'd make it an easy solve."

"Possible. But it's still early. She hasn't been here long. I'm curious about the tourist angle though -- her clothes definitely stand out in this neighborhood as being a little incongruous."

"How do you mean?"

"See how she's wearing Chuck Taylor sneakers and a pair of corduroy pants. None of the locals would wear that. It's all Nike shoes and Juicy track suit couture around here. *Her* clothes say middle class, like the kind you buy at The Gap or Forever 21 or some such store. But if I'm not mistaken, she's also wearing a men's Balenciaga hoodie. Those aren't cheap, my friend. My teenager begged me to buy her one of those once after the divorce – claimed it was the only way I could show her I still loved her. The price tag for that little gem read \$1400. Fucking \$1400 dollars for a fucking hoodie if you can believe that! I told her she could have my love for free, but pound sand if she thought I was gonna spend my hard earned dough on some bullshit overpriced sweatshirt."

"That does sound insane."

"You're telling me. Hey, did you catch a look at that wristwatch she's wearing? Another high end ticket item for sure. Only it looks too big for her. See how the clasp is closed, but there's still extra space between the band and her wrist? Looks like its gonna fall off. You think she stole it? Maybe stole it and the shop owner ran her down? Some of these places around here are real serious about being robbed and definitely take matters into their own hands before they call the cops."

"Maybe. But why leave the watch behind then? Plus, there aren't any jewelry stores around these parts that are that high end. That's more up town. But I don't think it's her watch either. Or at least, if it is, it was gifted to her."

"How do you figure?"

"Most young people don't wear watches anymore, right? They use their cellphones. And she don't have a tan line on her wrist which would indicate she wears one on the regular."

"People still wear watches."

"Sure, but if they do, it's one of them internet, Dick Tracy gizmos they pair to their cellphones to keep them company while they go jogging or to the store or sit on the crapper or whatever. Look here, that watch is old school analog. Not even designed for a woman to wear. More like it belongs to some rich guy who wants everyone to know he has money but doesn't want to be flashy about it. Given as a gift for a birthday or anniversary by the doting wife probably. That sorta thing. So if this girl's wearing it, my guess is, it's sentimental. Like maybe a father or older brother sentimental. I'll even bet there's an inscription inside the band with initials and a message."

"Or maybe it belonged to a customer or sugar daddy who got angry?"

"Maybe, but, again, she doesn't look the type who'd have a sugar daddy. Just an assumption though. Look at her fingernails. They're short, not fancy. And her haircut says practical, not dressy. And her clothes aren't low cut or slinky like she's trying to accent any special features. She looks like she should be at band camp or something like that."

"Well, at least with her still wearing an expensive watch and hoodie, we can rule out robbery as the motive."

"True."

"Whaddya make the time of death for? There's lividity with rigor, but she's not too stiff. About four hours?"

"Eh, maybe. Don't need to say. We'll let the Coroner call that one. What really interests me is why does she have a death grip on a freshly wrapped pickle from Carmichael's Deli? Do you see a sandwich bag or anything else around? Here, take a look. And check her mouth. I'll check the trash over here."

"Nope, no sandwich or sandwich bag."

"You see any obstruction?"

"No. Her airway looks clear. No bulges to the throat that I can detect either. She does have braces with some food traces in the wire. Which meant she didn't brush after. Bad girl! You shouldn't neglect your dental hygiene."

"The trash is clean too. Looks like it was recently picked up. Today's Saturday, right? Do they pick up Friday's in this neighborhood?"

"Don't know. I'll make a note to check."

"Strange how she's still holding the pickle. Seems off."

"No one ever eats the pickle."

"Right, no one eats the pickle."

Truman and Sands exchanged a look of wry amusement.

"You still don't think this was staged?"

"No. I think she fell right where she's lying. No drag marks. No signs of a fight. But you see the scuff mark on the front of her right shoe there? And the smudges at her knees? That matches the marks over here on the ground. Looks like she might've tripped and fallen is my guess. Maybe when she fell, she hit her head."

"Holding a bottle of whiskey? It would've shattered."

"Maybe not. Maybe she didn't use her hands to brace her fall. Maybe she twisted to avoid contact and ended up hitting her head on the pavement first before flopping over onto her back – which could keep the bottle and pickle safe. That might also explain the death grip. Muscles tend to seize with blunt force trauma and don't release after death."

"Possible. You think she was being chased?"

"Maybe, but I don't really see any signs of that. Still, it wouldn't hurt to check for cameras. From the end of the alley to at least a couple blocks in either direction around the neighborhood. You never know, maybe video caught something."

"So you're saying she fell, hit her head, and rolled over? That still don't explain how she died necessarily. I don't see any bumps, dents, wounds, or blood from her head. And her face looks clean. A little mascara streak like she was crying, but still fresh."

"True. But cranial impact can be undetectable to the naked eye. They call it the Boxer's Kiss. But we won't know for sure till the autopsy report comes back."

"So she hit her head, rolled over, and passed out? Without breaking the whiskey bottle or pickle? More like she laid down to take a nap and froze to death is my guess."

"With her eyes still open? Lying in the middle of the alley? I don't think so. Plus, it wasn't that cold last night. Maybe in the 50's."

"Alcohol poisoning then? Half the bottle's gone."

"Maybe. Or she could've drunkenly stumbled, fell, hit her head and passed out. That would be an easy enough solution."

"Well, how about the guy who found her? Vito something or other. He might provide a few details."

"Sure, why not. Call him over. Let's shake the tree a little."

Phillips walked Vito over and left him with the detectives to go pull tape from a couple of alley security cameras Sands directed him to.

"You know this girl?" Detective Sands asked Vito.

"No sir. Never saw her before this morning."

"You sure? She didn't come into your shop last night? Maybe you two have a little after hours thing going on?"

"No sir! I got me a girl at home. And I only work the morning shift from six till noon. Just general morning stuff -- prep the counters, clean the bathrooms, take deliveries, that kinda thing. My cousin Vinnie and his wife own the shop. They come in around noon and stay till close at ten. And a neighbor boy, Tony, comes in afternoons on Fridays and Saturdays to help out. But he leaves when they do."

"You got Vinnie's number? And this Tony's?"

“Yeah, of course. But you should go talk to the principal over at Moultrie’s across the street first.”

“Why’d we do that?”

“Cause that girl’s wearing school colors. And the “MTI” sewn on her sweatshirt stands for “Moultrie Technical Institute.” They had a big basketball game there last night against Brooklyn Tech over in the gym too. The place was packed. Lots of kids running around. And you know Brooklyn showed up in force.”

“What? And you think this girl was the victim of retaliation? Over a basketball game?”

“I ain’t saying that. That’s your guys’ job. I’m just the poor *schnook* who found her. God rest her soul.”

“Well, it’s not a bad idea. Thanks for the tip. You can leave your number and your cousin’s number with the patrol officer before you go. And, hey Vito, don’t go on vacation for a while, okay? We may still want to talk to you again.”

“Whatever you say detective.”

After the Coroner’s Deputy arrived for the girl and the Crime Scene Unit finished processing the scene, the detectives walked over to Moultrie Technical Institute. Moultrie Tech – one of the recent conversions of old industrial warehouses lining the waterfront recently turned into a higher education private college. Real progress according to the mayor. Real gentrification as far as Dan was concerned. His grandparents had lived in this neighborhood all their lives. Four blocks up on K St across from Devereux in fact. And they were just two of the many Italian-Americans who lived close by and worked the industrial warehouses to make ends meet. No longer though. There was a real push to out every blue collar family who lived along

the Garrison so the rich and elite could move into the high end condos and retail shops the mayor was pushing for. And MTI was their first shot across the bow.

Walking over to Moultrie Tech, Detective Sands still could see remnants of the old neighborhood in the bones of the current buildings. Stagnaro's Piscary used to be right in the center there and always had a half dozen fishing trawlers docked on the waterfront side. That was where his grandmother used to send him and his granddad for the day's fresh catch. And where the college gym now stood was once a big dirt lot where everyone parked their cars during work shifts. And where teenagers came at night to look out over the waterfront and make out. It wasn't like that anymore though.

At the moment, Detective Sands could see all the gym doors were thrown wide open and the janitorial staff busy cleaning up after last night's revelries.

"Looks like they had more than a basketball game," commented Truman. "Looks like it was a real circus. Look at all those White Claws dumped on the ground like that. You ever try one of them White Claws?"

"No. Not my preferred drink."

"Well, they ain't half bad. Taste like fizzy juice. But it ain't a good liquor buzz, let me tell ya. More like a weird, nervous feeling you get after you drink ten or twelve of them. Sorta like when we had to take that Taser training a couple years ago and they zapped us. All jittery and the like. Remember that?"

"I remember you screamed like a little girl."

Truman laughed, "Fuck if I did. I took my hit, just like the rest of you."

They crossed into the main building and walked down a short hallway to the administrative offices, following the signs along the way. No one was around, probably because it was Saturday, but the office was open and, at the back, they could see

another door open with the glass door sign reading "Dean of Students." There they found the Dean of Students, Paul Tulsan, sitting at his desk, head down. A bottle of Pepto Bismo and a bottle of aspirin open on the desk in front of him.

"Excuse me," Detective Sands called out, knocking on the door frame. Tulsan jumped, like a puppet on a string, and started blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"Sorry to bother you. Dean Tulsan? Are you Dean Tulsan?"

Both could see Tulsan's hair was sticking up on one side. His coat hanging off the back of his chair, his tie loosened and his oxford shirt, half unbuttoned and open at the collar, wrinkled and sweat stained. He looked like the epitome of an unshaven, down on his luck bum professor who'd slept in his clothes for a few days. Only with more expensive clothes than the average bum. Or a Dean of Students at a small college for that matter.

"I'm Detective Sands and this is Detective Truman. Can we chat with you a moment? Is this a bad time?"

"No, not at all gentleman," Tulsan croaked, clearing the frog from his throat. "Hello gentlemen. No, of course not. Please come in. I saw all the commotion across the street earlier. Everything okay?"

"Do you know this girl?" Detective Sands asked showing Tulsan a polaroid pic of the deceased girl he'd taken a few hours earlier.

"Aww, no. Aww, no!"

"So you know her."

"I do," Dean Tulsan said dropping his head into his hands. "That's Cindy Byers. Uh, do you know what happened to her?"

"We're looking into it. But you know her," Detective Truman confirmed.

"Yes. She's a sophomore in our engineering program. We're a small school and I know most all our students. Cindy was working on our robotics project with Professor Dullard's group."

"When was the last time you saw Cindy?" Sands asked.

"Professor Dullard and his students were down in Boston on a field trip this past week. Came back yesterday. They were at MIT for a robotics seminar."

Both Sands and Truman noticed Tulsan didn't really answer the question. Or mention Cindy.

"You got a stomachache there Dean Tulsan?" Detective Truman asked.

"What? Why?"

"There's an empty bottle of Pepto in your waste basket here and you got a second one open on your desk."

"I get indigestion. It happens sometimes. You know, with age and all."

"Sure, I get it," Truman commiserated. "You ever eat sandwiches from Carmichael's Deli across the street?"

Sands gave Truman a look. Truman slightly nodded.

"On occasion."

"When was the last time you ate there?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I had one of their sandwiches last night after the basketball game. Spicy Italian. Thus the indigestion, you know. The wife doesn't exactly like it when I eat that kind of food, so I only do so when I work late. They're very good."

"How many sandwiches you eat last night?"

"One. Why?"

"One? Just one?"

"Yeah one. Again, why?"

"Well," Detective Truman spoke, "I happened to glance down in your waste basket and noticed a bag from Carmichael's Deli in there too."

"I just said I ate sandwiches from there last evening. We had a basketball game last night and I stayed late to join my students to cheer on our team. Which means I didn't have time to go home for dinner."

Truman picked up the sandwich bag from Carmichael's Deli bag out of the trash.

"Don't you need a warrant to do that?" Tulsan squeaked.

"Not when it's in plain sight. You nervous all of a sudden?"

"Of course not."

"Then you don't mind if I look inside the bag."

"If you must. I don't know what that will accomplish."

"Well, let's see," Truman replied opening the bag. "Interesting. I see the empty wrappers for two sandwiches. And one fresh pickle wrapped in wax paper from Carmichael's. But not the second pickle. What do you think about that, Mr. Tulsan?"

"Think about what? It's just trash. I already told you I ate sandwiches last night. Right here in my office."

"No. You said you only ate one sandwich. There are two empty sandwich wrappers here. And every sandwich from Carmichael's comes with a freshly wrapped pickle, don't they? I see two sandwiches here, but only one pickle. No one ever eats the pickle."

"No one ever eats the pickle," Sands replied shaking his head.

"I don't see how that makes any difference."

"It's interesting is all," Sands interjected. "You like to take a little drink every now and then with your sammies too, Dean Tulsan? Sure you do. Everybody does right?"

"So?"

"Well, I noticed you got two empty glasses on the shelf behind you with a little whiskey still in the bottom of one. Very nice glasses too. Look expensive. Any chance the whiskey in that one is Glen Fiddich? One of the glasses even has, what is that lipstick on the rim? But I don't see no bottle. You keep a bottle in your office there Dean Tulsan?"

"I, uh, no. I mean, I do, but I must have drank the last of it and disposed of the bottle."

"Sure, sure, I been known to do that on more than one occasion," Truman commiserated, "but I don't see the bottle in the trash. You still got the bottle around here?"

"No, I...one of the cleaning crew probably emptied the trash out last night."

"And only took the bottle, but left the sandwich bag in the trash? That make sense to you?"

"Well, no. I forgot and probably walked it out to the trash myself. Can't have impressionable minds seeing me take a drink in my office, right?"

"Impressionable students, right," Truman replied.

"What time do you have, Dean Tulsan?" Sands asked.

Both watched as Dean Tulsan instinctively lifted his left wrist to look at his wristwatch, but realized a little too late he was no longer wearing a watch. The tan line easily noticeable to all though. Tulsan quickly dropped his arm back down onto the desk and covered his wrist with his opposite hand.

“Now see here officers!” Dean Tulsan ramped up, trying to re-assert himself. He felt the balance of suspicion in the room and didn’t like the uncomfortable feeling it gave him. Or the suspicious eyes of the two hulking detectives staring intently at him. “I don’t like what you gentlemen are doing. Or how you are speaking to me! I’m not accustomed to being questioned like this in my office. Or what you seem to be implying...well, being questioned at all for that matter. I AM the Dean of Students at this institution. And my wife is a much respected lawyer with Goodwin Proctor Boston. You would be well advised to change your attitude and treat me with the respect I’ve earned.”

“Of course, Dean. I apologize if we gave any other impression than respect for you and your position in higher education,” Sands soothed, trying to bait the hook. “And with that said, I hope you’ll forgive me for asking this next question. Why do you have Cindy Byers school file open on your desk? She come to visit you in your office recently? Maybe last night?”

Sands gave Truman a look to see if they were on the same page. They clearly were.

“I think you gentlemen need to leave now.”

“No. Not just yet, Mr. Tulsan. I believe we have a few more questions,” Truman replied smiling. “But it might be better if we ask them in a more suitable location downtown.” Because from all his years of experience, Dan could recognize when an interview flipped from a fishing expedition into a person of interest right in front of his eyes. It was like the click of a switch. Sure, it might be too soon to call the death of

Cindy Byers a murder until they'd from the coroner. But for sure Tulsan knew more than he was letting on about her. About their interactions together. "You, Dean, appear to be the last person to have seen Cindy alive. Has that occurred to you? I think that warrants a little consideration, don't you?" *And some explanation, Truman thought, about what exactly happened in this office that made Cindy run off into the night clutching a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a wax paper wrapped pickle from Carmichael's Deli in the other.*

Detective Sands knew it happened this way too. They'd fall into contact with a suspect before their initial investigation had been completed and sufficient evidence gathered to make an arrest. Which meant good investigative notes were essential. And seizing opportunities when they appeared. You had to be able to roll with cases no matter which direction they went. Stay loose. And not expect everything to be set in stone or tied up in a neat bow. Still, locking down information every step of the way was important. Especially if Tulsan was lying, and he surely seemed to be. Then locking Tulsan into a recorded statement early in the investigation, while he was still just a person of interest, especially if his story and timeline were fabricated, would be powerful tool later on if the DA determined enough evidence existed to charge him with a crime.

"Mr. Tulsan," Detective Sands growled, "I am in agreement with my partner. I think things would be best served if you joined us downtown where we can talk a little longer in a more official capacity. You're not under arrest, mind you, and you don't have to agree, though your cooperation would go a long way. But I think, if you say no, we could reach out to a judge to compel you under the circumstances. But let's not let it come to that just yet. We're just looking for the truth about what happened and have a few more questions concerning Cindy is all. And I have a feeling you're the right guy to speak to."

The End.