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“WHAT ABOUT MURDER?”

Even in the crowded restaurant, conversation at high Saturday-night boil, the question turned heads at more than a few tables. I gestured for the stranger to sit, but he shook his head and repeated the query. Joe and Mike, despite how accustomed they were to such interruptions, stared in fascination at the ungainly man looming over us like that relative at Thanksgiving you'll do anything to avoid but secretly can't stop glancing at to see what happens next. I sighed, aware of the attention we were attracting and realizing there was no easy way around our predicament.

“Murder?” I said.

“You heard me. Do you investigate it?”

“I usually leave that to the police.”

“But what if they won't?”

“Won't what?”

“What if the police won't investigate a murder?”

“That's not been my experience.”

“Then maybe you haven't been paying attention to what's really going on.”

“Listen, we're running late, and I don't have time to talk right at the moment.”

“So you're just like all the rest? You won't help me. Is that it?”

“I can’t help you because I don’t know what you’re talking about. I also can’t help the fact I’m running late. Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“Fine,” he said, squeezing himself into the booth beside Joe before I could object. “I’ll start from the beginning. My dad was a cop, and someone killed him. And I need help finding the bastard who did it.”

LET THE record show this whole sorry mess started because, as usual, I bit off more than I could chew.

I’d taken an early-afternoon surveillance gig to shore up my moribund bank account, even though I knew my schedule was tight. In my defense, the job should have been a cinch—trailing a furnace repairman who was claiming workers’ comp for a bad back through Home Depot while he loaded multiple four-by-four timbers onto a cart. Instead, as usual, things got complicated. It turned out he was also having an affair—the lumber was destined for the deck he was building for his girlfriend—which meant extra tracking time. As a result, I was late picking up my sons from the houses of my respective ex-wives, as usual, and my plans for dinner at home as part of my custody weekend went out the window.

Plan B was a couple of large pepperonis around the corner at Plank’s on South Parsons. We ate quickly because we had only thirty minutes before movie time—one of the Marvel films, the name of which I’d already forgotten. Something to do with avenging and justice. I was mapping out the fastest route to the theater in my head, Mike was complaining we were going to miss the previews, and Joe was fiddling with his phone when the man approached our table.

“You’re Woody Hayes.”

I looked up. Just what I needed. Another Ohio State football fan eager to berate me for ancient sins I’d spent half my life trying to atone for—not that I’m counting. He was heavy, balding, with thick black-framed glasses just short of factory-floor protective wear. Intensity glowing in his eyes. I thought about

making a dash for it. But as often happens to me, there was no place to hide.

“Once upon a time. I go by Andy now. Was there something—”

“I’ve seen you on the news. You’re a private eye.”

“That’s right. An investigator, technically.”

I checked the time on my phone. Twenty-five minutes before showtime. At this point, maybe faster to forget surface streets and head straight for the highway. Cutting it close but still doable, especially if the previews started a minute or two late.

“What kinds of things do you investigate?”

Mike sighed loudly. Joe, despite the sullen mood he’d been in recently, looked on with interest.

“Missing persons, missing money, very rarely missing pets.” I dug for my wallet and retrieved a card. “Maybe you could give me a call?”

And that’s when he asked the question.

“What about murder?”

I GLANCED up the aisle and saw a woman at a far table staring at us. The man followed my gaze. “It’s just my sister. She’s not too thrilled I walked over here.”

That was an understatement. To judge by her expression she couldn’t have been more mortified had the man sauntered up to us in his birthday suit.

I nodded at her. “Your father. When did he die?”

A pause. “Last month.”

“Around here?” I hadn’t heard of any cops being killed recently.

“Yeah. But it took him forty years to die.”

That was just enough to pique my curiosity.

“Keep going,” I said, ignoring Mike’s groan. “But make it fast. We’re in a hurry, like I said.”

Without invitation, he picked up a piece of our pizza and started talking. He said his name was Preston Campbell. He lived nearby, in the house where he and his sister grew up. His father was Howard Campbell, but everyone called him Howie.

A beat cop in the late seventies who worked a bunch of precincts but eventually settled for the University District up by Ohio State.

“Lot of guys didn’t like that rotation because of everything happening on campus in those days. The hippies and the music and the protests and everything. He didn’t mind it so much. Plus, back in those days the neighborhood was still intact. Lot of professors lived around there. But fall of ’79, cops started seeing a bunch of burglaries. Not random, either. Professional. They figured it was a team, knew what they were doing. Had a system for watching places, checking out people’s movements, striking when residents weren’t home. Some professors got cleaned out. University raised a stink and the city put on extra patrols. My dad was assigned a swing shift, 8 p.m. to 4 a.m., to keep an eye on things.”

“We don’t have much time here,” I said.

He continued as if he hadn’t heard me. “So, this one night, him and his partner were coming back from a dinner break. They’re making a pass, up by Indianola and Chittenden, when they see this van that hadn’t been there earlier. They drive by, going slow, my dad at the wheel. His partner notices a man in the driver’s seat who slumps down real low when he sees the cruiser. They keep going, pull over half a block up, and get out. They start walking back toward the van when his partner—guy named Fitzzy—spots someone in a yard with something in his arms. They both take off running after him. That’s when it happened.”

“What?”

“Dad,” Mike said.

“My dad goes around back, to the left, OK? Fitzzy cuts right. My dad’s checking out the rear door, which is partly open, when he hears Fitzzy yelling. He runs around and sees Fitzzy on the ground, unconscious, and some guy hightailing it. He starts chasing and the guy turns and shoots my dad, three times.” Jab, jab, jab, went the piece of pizza in his hand. “He goes down, but still manages to get two shots off.”

“He get the guy?”

“Oh yeah,” Campbell said. “Now they’re both down, both bleeding out. My dad calls out to Fitzy, he wakes up long enough to call it in, and that’s the beginning of the end.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean my dad survived, but his days as a cop were over.”

“What about Fitzy? And what about the guy who shot your dad?”

“Fitzy was fine—he was back at work the next day. The guy who shot my dad? That’s the problem. He disappeared.”

“Disappeared? Like, ran off? After being shot?”

Campbell shook his head. “After they arrested him. But before he could be prosecuted.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Dad. We’ve got like *fifteen* minutes.”

“Hang on,” I said.

“But this is the thing,” Campbell continued. “I just found out he’s still alive.”

“The guy who shot your dad?”

He said yes emphatically, pizza-flecked spittle flying from his mouth.

“After all these years?”

“You heard me.”

“Where?”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know.”

Our server appeared and inquired how everything was. I nodded blankly. Mike asked for the check.

I said, “You know he’s alive but you don’t know where?”

“That’s right. Which is why I need you to find him.” He retrieved a lumpy wallet and pulled out what looked like several twenties. “I’m not a charity case. I can pay.”

“Dad!” Mike said.

“Just hang on,” I said, eyeing the money. “We’ve got time.”

Except that we really didn’t. And sure enough, we missed the previews. As usual.

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AT TEN THE NEXT morning I pulled up in front of Campbell's house, a one-story brick bungalow two blocks off Parsons and very much looking its age, which had to be pushing the century mark. Both boys still asleep back home. A note on the kitchen table explaining breakfast options and reminding them to at least start their homework. A one-in-three chance they'd even be awake by the time I returned, but a guy can dream. It's how we fathers of the year roll.

Campbell opened up after my second knock and led me into the living room, which was dark and stuffy. The furniture inside looked old and the house smelled of something fried too long. His sister, the woman from Plank's the night before, rose from a chair as I entered.

"This is Monica. She wanted to be here."

"Monica Mathers," she said, shaking my hand with an odd formality.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Same," she said, though her curt response and body language, stiff and withdrawn, suggested otherwise. Her trim figure and newish-looking jeans, blouse, and sweater contrasted sharply with Campbell's heft and the thrift-store vibe of his clothes. Beauty and the Beast, siblings edition? Campbell reclined on a couch and gestured for me to sit in a second chair opposite Monica.

“Here’s the file,” he said, lifting a thick manila folder from the coffee table.

“File?”

“Everything that happened with my dad.”

“Our dad,” Monica said.

I took the file from Preston, opened it, and read the headline from the top document, a photocopied clip from the old *Columbus Citizen-Journal*.

**CITY COP GRAVELY WOUNDED
IN SHOOTOUT WITH BUCKEYE BURGLAR**

“Buckeye Burglar?”

“Ebersole’s trademark,” Campbell said. “He left a freshly shucked buckeye in plain view in the houses he took down. Thought he was being cute, I guess. Somebody leaked it, and that’s the nickname they gave him.”

I turned back to the article. The Buckeye Burglar turned out to be one John J. Ebersole. The story noted that Ebersole had also been wounded, as Preston had explained the night before, but with few details. I skimmed through a couple more *C-J* and *Dispatch* articles and saw further references to Ebersole, whose injuries left him hospitalized, but nothing about charges.

“So what happened? Was he convicted?”

“No.” Campbell shook his head angrily. “I told you, he wasn’t even charged.”

“Why not?”

“At first, too badly wounded, supposedly. I guess they figured he wasn’t going anywhere. But then the next thing anyone knew, he just walked out of the hospital one day and disappeared.”

“Left town?”

“As far as anybody knows.”

“But how could that have happened?” Maybe things were looser in the Columbus justice system four decades earlier, but I had a hard time believing that even then a cop shooter could just slip through the cracks.

Campbell leaned forward. "I'll tell you what happened. They let him go on purpose."

"On purpose?"

"Preston," Monica said.

"He had something on somebody," Campbell continued. "He knew things he shouldn't have. That's the only way a guy beats what should have been a twenty-four-hour guard."

The room went still. Though the day was cool, Campbell was sweating and his fleshy face was florid, as if he'd been walking in the hot sun instead of sitting on a couch in a darkened room looking at old newspaper clippings. From her chair Monica stared sadly at her brother.

"Preston," she repeated.

"Something like what?" I said.

"That's the question, isn't it?"

"I suppose," I said, trying not to sound impatient. "Any ideas?"

"Preston," Monica said again, voice barely above a whisper. "The fire?"

"I don't know what he had," Campbell said, ignoring her. "That's your job—to find out."

"And if I can't? I mean, it was forty years ago. I'm guessing a lot of the people who were involved then are retired, or . . ."

"Or dead. Tell me about it. We'll get to that part in a minute. I didn't say it was going to be easy."

I did my best to avoid the manic gleam in Campbell's eyes as I considered the hour of sleep I'd given up to be here on time. The third cup of coffee I could have lingered over. The extra five minutes I could have spent chatting with the attractive woman walking her collie at Schiller Park, who'd stopped to exchange pleasantries as her dog and Hopalong sniffed each other's hindquarters.

"Listen, Preston—"

"He did it in Rochester too."

"I'm sorry?"

“Just walked out of jail.”

Monica was slowly shaking her head, her eyes meeting mine as if silently begging me to stop before things got any worse.

“Rochester? Like Minnesota?”

“New York State. Up by Buffalo.”

“OK. Why there?” I knew Rochester by reputation—and by one incident connected to my days with the Cleveland Browns that I’d rather not revisit—but had never been.

“It’s where he was from, originally. At least according to the articles from when he was arrested.”

“What happened there?”

“He got arrested on a theft charge. But there was no hold on him or anything, so he just disappeared again.”

“In that case, how do you know about it?”

“I have a Google alert on him and it popped up one day. Just a little brief in the daily paper. I called everybody as soon as I saw it—cops, prosecutor, FBI.”

“And?”

“Preston,” Monica said. “You’re wasting the man’s time. Either you tell him or I will.”

“Tell me what?”

“We can’t be sure,” Preston mumbled.

“Sure about what?”

Before Monica could respond, Preston took the folder from me, flipped the documents over, pulled out a single sheet of paper from the back, and handed it to me. It was an obituary clipped from the *Dispatch* for someone named Wayne Stratton. He’d died two weeks earlier, a few days before Labor Day. The black-and-white photo showed a guy in his thirties with a thin beard and a wide smile, wearing a JEGS ball cap and giving the camera a thumbs-up. Thirty-four when he passed, according to the obit. “Died suddenly,” it said.

“And the connection here is—”

“There,” Campbell said, jabbing the paper with a fat forefinger. “Under ‘survivors.’”

I read down the list, which included a mother, father, step-father, brother, and sister, two grandparents, and a great-uncle. I stopped when I saw the name. *John J. Ebersole*.

“You think that’s the same person?”

“Who else could it be?”

“Wayne Stratton’s great-uncle?”

“That’s what it says.”

“Possible it’s another Ebersole?”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

Monica. We both looked at her. She rose from her chair, yanked the file from her brother’s hands, leafed through it, stopped, and handed me another piece of paper.

“There. Read that.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the thing my brother’s afraid to tell you about.”

“Which is?”

“Ebersole died in a fire forty-eight hours after he got out of jail in Rochester. He’s not gone because he disappeared. He’s gone because he’s dead.”