

SHAME

I shut the door tightly but quietly. I certainly did not want Dad to know I was sneaking out. He had returned to the hotel room late and drunk. If I did not create a loud noise, he would not wake to discover that I was missing.

Even at the end of February, southeastern Florida boasted bearable nighttime temperatures, dipping from the mid-70s in the day to the upper 50s overnight. And the pool was heated, so a quick skinny-dip would feel gratifying. I felt emboldened by the events of the past few days, and my skin tingled in anticipation as I slunk down the stairs.

As soon as I slipped out the door to the patio, I scented danger. The woman floating face-down in the pool was surely

dead. I might have been embarrassed at my body's reaction to her naked body, except that Dad had sat me down a little over a year ago to explain the changes occurring within me. So I simply accepted the hardness for what it was--a response triggered by the excitement of what I had been about to do and by the unexpected view of the familiar and perfectly rounded ass undulating in the water.

She was one of the literary agents at the convention. I remembered her warm and engaging voice, but I knew her words could sting. I wondered if an author of murders would really condescend to committing one simply because of a bad review. Apparently the young agent's sensual beauty had not shielded her from trauma. I admired the view a bit longer.

Strangely, the area was not well lit, as if several lights had concurrently failed. The slight breeze stimulated me. With heightened awareness, my ears picked up the ticking of the wristwatch on the small table next to the lounge chair. Evidence. At this early hour, I assumed no one else had yet stumbled upon the scene. I had to act fast.

I glanced around to be sure no one was watching before sliding along the exterior wall, keeping myself in shadow, so I could scoop up the watch. I stuffed it in my shorts' pocket as I surveyed the rest of the patio and pool.

Farther down the side of the pool and visible in the dim light, a robe lay discarded against another chair, on which sat a folder stuffed with papers. I suspected the agent had worn the robe down to her final swim. I left it all there and stole back inside, remembering to wipe the handles with my towel.

I awoke in the morning, intent to find a reason why she had been murdered. I hoped the folder of papers would provide a clue. Dad still snored as if ingesting a caustic solution. I left him undisturbed, knowing he would join us when he felt up to it. I calculated how much time I might have.

Math was not my strongest subject in school, but I fared well in the class. According to the tests, my reading comprehension was off the charts, and I had a vivid imagination that I could pen down at will. I considered writing as a profession, following in Dad's footsteps. The conferences gave me opportunity to see the industry from the inside and to study authors other than him.

Shrill squawking stung my ears when I exited the elevator into the lobby.

"Well, I think it's just macabre that he brings him to these. Especially after what happened with his mother. And now this happens."

"You're overreacting, Bertie. He's fourteen now, and he's growing up fast. Carl tells me he likes coming."

"But the woman was murdered. What is Carl thinking?"

"They never proved it was murder. And that was several years ago. Besides, Carl protected him from the inquest."

The two elderly women registered my presence with shocked expressions. I had gained height in the past year, and I knew my regular workouts at school enhanced my physique; this made hiding in plain view more difficult, but I managed. The gray-haired ladies expected me to be troubled--I had heard that everyone did--and they quickly greeted me with their duplicitous smiles. I grimaced at them and intentionally skulked across the lobby, trying to catch snatches of conversation.

"She was reading Margaret's manuscript. I hear they found it on the chair, all marked up."

"Margaret wasn't too happy with her, I understand."

"You don't think she would have..."

So the papers belonged to Margaret. And she was upset. Good. I did not like Margaret.

But the more I thought about it, I knew it was implausible. Margaret was not psychically capable of murder. I supposed it was this quality that kept her unpublished. It would definitely keep her off my list of possible perpetrators. Perhaps I could

glean something more promising from searching the dead woman's room.

I retrieved the keycard I still had and used it to gain entrance to the room. I ducked under the yellow tape and closed the door behind me, carefully wiping away any incriminating prints. I did not want to draw undue attention.

Items would have been thoroughly documented, I knew; still, I had to locate some clue. An unfinished note lay open on the desk to the left of the television stand. Remnants of powder clung to the paper, and one print stood out in the upper right corner of the page. I read the curlicue-like script. I knew then what I needed. But I did not have much time.

Dad joined me later that evening in the hotel's restaurant. "I suppose you've heard about Vanessa." He tried to appear calm, and I noted the relief in his eyes, but his hands shook perceptibly.

I nodded, and Dad continued, "They just arrested Greg."

"She was going to expose their affair," I said, taking another bite of my pasta. "They found her underwear in his hotel room. That's how they were able to tie him to her murder." I twirled my fork aimlessly on my plate and observed him. "That and the note she was writing."

Dad stared vacantly through me. "I can't believe this happened." His voice broke, scratching up to higher octaves.

I continued to enjoy my meal. "I assume he denied it, of course." My voice had deepened last year and was now full and mellifluous. "But when you're named in the letter, that's kind of hard to explain." I watched my father for his reaction.

His eyes focused on me then winced as if I had struck him in the gut. I marveled again at how closely pain and desire resembled each other. My mother had first taught me that.

I fished the wristwatch from my pocket and slid it across the table to my father. "Stick to writing about them, not committing them." I kept my attention riveted on my food as I chewed and pushed my fork around on its hunting expedition across my plate. "You're too careless."

I heard my father gasp. Slowly raising my gaze, I savored my food as I watched the tears form in his eyes. "Did you even remember to wear a condom?" Scorn suffused my voice.

"She said you were more of a man than I was." His voice was little more than a whisper. "That's when I knew." One tear rolled down his sunken cheek. "She just laughed at me."

I shook my head. She had seen right into his soul and twisted cruelly. "She wasn't like Mom." I realized that he was just--still--trying to protect me. "I went to her."

"She was just like your mother!" The virulence with which he answered seemed to catch him off guard. Once the words left his mouth, he gaped at me, cowering. He glanced around furtively as if afraid that people were staring. "How did--"

"I've always known Mom's death wasn't an accident."

I waited for my words to penetrate and sink in.

I was too young to survive on my own yet. Even though I hated being dependent, I knew I still had a few more years left before I could move out. Dad would look out for me a while longer, and I would take care of him.

Dad bowed his head. "I'm so sorry." He slipped the watch onto his wrist.

I stepped around the table so I could cradle his weary head against my chest and sighed. "I love you, too, Dad."

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