

Collateral Damage

by

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Chapter 2

In the movies they always go down to the morgue to see the body and talk with the sometimes-comical-sometimes-fat-and-greasy-sometimes-erudite-ex-college-professor who runs the place. You know, the Jack Klugman-type fella. That seemed like the thing to do. The phone book told me where to go, and was polite about it too, so I went there.

It wasn't easy to get in so as a last resort I tried my press credentials. Lo and behold! They worked. The walking pimple

at the front desk must have been new to the City or a lover of literature because his reaction was the complete opposite of the harpy at the pig pen. Of course, it could have been a vindication for euthanasia too.

In any event, he paged someone in a lab coat to take me down to the deep freeze to check out the body. They knew exactly who I wanted to see when I described her. "Oh," said the Pimple, "the one with the cha-cha-pinkos. Too bad she's just meat, now, or I'd give a month's pay to squeeze those babies."

"Yeah, sure. If she was breathing air you wouldn't even get close enough to wonder how big they were."

He glared at me but he didn't change his mind about letting me in because the guy in the lab coat showed up right then. He looked just like I always imagined a doctor of science to look. Tall as Lincoln, droopy face and ears like a beagle, short hair and clean shaven, with Poindexter glasses. He even had a deep rumbling-around-in-a-grotto-sound voice that doctors should have.

"This way, if you please," he politely intoned.

I followed him to the elevator and we went down a few floors, getting cold and colder. The good doctor didn't say anything until we reached the bottom where he again intoned, "This way, if you please."

Trying to be friendly I asked, "Work long in the catacombs, hmm?"

He looked at me and blinked a few times. "Oh, in Rome. No,

but I went to school in a place that smells like them."

"Where at?"

He looked at me some more, blinked, and said nothing.

"Where. At."

"Seattle. The forests smell of decay and damp."

"Oh." We looked at each other a moment, he blinking, me staring.

"This way," he murmured. I followed him through some hallways and down some stairs until we got to a room that had a big refrigerator door.

Here we paused, and the doctor looked pensive. "With the type of people we see here, it always amazes me that these rooms stay so cool."

"Say what? I don't get it."

"One would figure, wouldn't one," he said most seriously, "that the closer one came to hell, the hotter it would become."

"I see what you mean."

"Oh well," he shrugged with little conviction. "Shall we proceed?" He opened a door and, "This way, if you please."

I should have brought a jacket; it was a few degrees above freezing. If that. We went over to the blonds latest resting place, a metal drawer in the biggest Amana I'd ever seen. The doctor opened the drawer for me and jammed it open with a block of wood taken from his pocket.

She was buck naked and beautiful. I don't think I'd ever

seen such large breasts standing straight up like that, except for in a Joan Crawford movie. Someone had taken the time to clean her up, at least her hair wasn't a tangle of seaweed. I looked into her face, the eyes weren't open this time and by God if she didn't look like she was asleep. I almost wanted to jab her in the side to make sure but reasoning got the better of me.

I didn't know what to look for so I just looked at her. Too bad, was all I could think.

"Seen enough?"

"No, but it'll have to do."

"Yes. I know."

The doctor removed and pocketed the block and the drawer silently slid shut on its own accord. Regret hung heavy on his shoulders. "Want to talk about it?" I asked.

He looked pensive again before he spoke. "Such a waste."

"Lots of young beautiful women die every day. They must; there's so many of them in L.A. and they have to make room for more."

"Are you always..."

"Such a smart ass? Yeah."

"And what newspaper did you say you represented?" I told him and the doctor nodded. "Ah, yes. I've heard of it. A bit offbeat, they say."

"That's putting it nicely. Any idea of what she died of?"

"Water."

"Water?"

"Oh yes. That's normally the cause of death in drowning. Another form of suffocation is all."

"Good. So I can quote you on that? Just kidding. Let me guess. You found fresh water in her lungs so somebody drowned her in the bathtub and then dumped her in the ocean, right?"

"No. It was saltwater." He looked at a clipboard dangling from the locker door and read, "Sally Van Meter. Age: Seventeen. Address: 3598 Glendon Avenue, Mar Vista. Cause of death: Fell off a sailboat at Aster Bay, Catalina Island, and drowned. It's all right here." He showed me the sheet of paper, all in black and white, that summed up the life of the girl inside the drawer.

"Drugs or alcohol?"

"No. I don't believe she used them." He looked at the drawer and sighed softly.

"They identified her pretty quick, didn't they? I mean she was just pulled out of the ocean a few hours ago."

"She had a wallet in her pocket."

I didn't remember a wallet. "How could she? Her pants were tighter than..."

The doctor looked at me, the picture of introspection, then said, "I've got some things to do."

"This way, if you please?"

"No, that won't be necessary. You can find your own way out can't you?"

"Um. Yeah. I suppose so. What about you."

"My place is here. I have work to do."

I looked around the room. It would make a good meat locker some day. All they needed were some hooks. As it was, I was cold and getting colder. The temperature didn't appear to bother the good doctor. Maybe he was used to it. I don't know, he was a pretty cold fish anyway. I showed myself out, seeking light like a moth and heat like a mosquito.

The Pimple was still at the front desk when I left.