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I WAS STANDING NEXT TO A TALL COP in a steady rain watching a wall of umbrellas. There were maybe twenty of them. It's not every day I start a murder investigation at a funeral where the murderer is also present, grieving for the dead like everyone else.

But she was. I should say murderess because she's a woman. And I ought to add 'alleged' because I had serious doubts about her complicity in the crime, even though she said she had confessed everything to the Nashville police.

For me that's where the doubts always start, with confessions. They start even earlier really, in childhood. You ever believe a kid who admits taking the McGuffin when it's discovered missing? Of course not. They always blame a bully brother or a whiny sister first. So it was her confession that queered this case for me from the get-go.

The mourners stood in the drizzle on a small slope that canted slightly downhill. The rainwater ran off our umbrellas onto the hard ground and into the open grave. Flanked by a pair of overweight gravediggers, the right reverend or pastor or whatever he was stood at the mouth of the pit mumbling some standard seminary-issue hocus-pocus for the dearly departed and waving a holy wand over the casket as it descended. The dead guy was being interred without music, so I guess they don't make waterproof organs.

Somewhere a bullfrog croaked. He made more sense to me than the man of the cloth, who was short as a fireplug but looked like a pile driver, neither of which can talk. Neither could he, really, except for his syrupy megachurch mumbo-jumbo.

The cop standing next to me was Nashville's chief of police, a black guy named Willie Hendrix. Nashville's climate is hard to describe. Take equal parts Houston humidity, London fog and Florida swamp gas, shake and bake, comes pretty close.

Nashville is the Bible capital of the world too, so it seemed fitting somehow that we were burying a preacher. The murderess –

sorry, alleged murderess – was the preacher’s wife. Shot him in the back – sorry again, allegedly shot him – with a brand-new Remington 870 20-gauge pump-action shotgun.

I turned to Hendrix and said, “John Wilson didn’t send me out from New York just to stand around and watch. When are you going to let me talk to the accused?” Wilson was the New York commissioner of police. We go way back.

He had called me in several times to help the NYPD. Forensics, what I do, was in high demand because corporate big shots were getting caught with their pants down, cooking their books by running a laundry list of frauds and scams functionally too complex for most cops to unravel.

Insurance scams, stock scams, dot-com scams. Then credit default swaps and speculative derivatives that practically brought the financial house down. And if the stakes were big enough, even murder. I was good at the links. That’s what caught Wilson’s eye.

Chief Hendrix stared straight ahead, mouthing the preacher’s verbal ritual word for word. He was taller than everybody there, including me, which is not saying a whole lot since I’m a full three inches shy of six feet. He wore a Class-A dress uniform instead of street clothes, his big black patent leather brogues shining like small mirrors as the raindrops rolled off. He had a walrus moustache that moved up and down as smoothly as a ventriloquist when he spoke out the side of his mouth.

“Like I said, you can see her at the Graybar.”

“Funny.” Graybar was local slang for jail. “I mean, alone.”

“So do I.”

I leaned forward under his umbrella and eyed her, at least as much as her phony veil would permit. I say phony because since I felt her confession was, maybe everything else about her was too. She may not have whacked the deceased but that’s not to say she wasn’t glad to see him gone, judging from the look on her face.

Her eyes, steel-blue and sharp, were constantly on the move. They took in everything; she didn’t miss much. High cheekbones suggested aristocratic origins, or at least a bloodline a lot purer than mine. She didn’t seem to be wearing lipstick, but the more I looked – stared, really – the more I realized she had put amaranth on her lips to give them a bluish look. Which made her face seem as pale as the dead man who was now sinking into the pit.

It was her hair I noticed most. That was the real killer. True blonde, soft and flaxen as liquid gold, even in the rain. Frame any face with that hair, you'd have a magnet. A powerful one.

When she lifted her right hand, she hefted Hendrix's left along with it. That's when I noticed the cuffs. She dabbed at something in one eye, the wet handcuffs sparkling like a pair of silver bracelets from Tiffany's. Why would she leave the Graybar to watch dirt being dumped on her dead husband? And why would the top cop chain her to his wrist instead of to some gumshoe's?

She caught me looking at her when she put her hand down. Her face went flush, a touch of color for a change, though out of anger or embarrassment I couldn't tell. Folding her hands in front of her slate-gray raincoat, inadvertently jerking Hendrix toward her. That tilted his big umbrella with the NPD logo, which dumped more rain in her direction, wetting her hair and dripping off her coat onto her rubber-soled, closed-heel comfort clogs.

Wet, her hair glowed like candlelight. All she did was shake her head, but in doing so she gave him a look that said, "Someday you'll wish you hadn't done that." Her eyes flicked at me again and suddenly softened. I wouldn't know why until later. A lot later.

Hendrix being preoccupied, I snapped open my own nylon folding rainshade to keep my threads dry. Not that I had a fashion fortune to protect, mind you. I don't spend much on suits, preferring Levis to gabardines, which prompts lots of friends to tell me that I could use a subscription to *GQ* more than any man they know. But they miss the point. I actually do take fashion tips from that magazine. Problem is, I use the August 1973 issue.

The right reverend finished his last rites as the gravediggers started shoveling mud on top of the coffin. They weren't paying close attention, which may explain why they dumped a shovelful or two on the preacher's shoes. He jumped back and danced around the open grave taking the Lord's name in vain as the mourners began to disperse.

As he approached, I could see his face more clearly. It was pockmarked with the remains of a childhood disease – measles, maybe, or chicken pox – which was perhaps the reason he seemed to wear a permanent scowl. From a distance maybe he looked young, but his hair was graying and thin and he walked with a kind of shuffle. His eyes said as little as his sermon.

“Chief Hendrix,” he mumbled with a nod, pointedly ignoring both his captive and me.

“Jimmy Lee,” he replied. “Short sermon. Maybe too short?”

The preacher with the vacant eyes shrugged. “Stock script. What did you expect, no family present?”

Hendrix cleared his throat in a loud and earthy manner as he tilted his head toward the blonde.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“Widow’s family, Jimmy. Don’t be obtuse.”

“Hardly matters now, does it? Who the hell’s this guy?”

Hendrix introduced us. We shook hands, the pastor’s grip as greasy and limp as undercooked bacon.

“Dawkins brings a skillset we don’t have much here. Friend of the commissioner, my former boss in New York.”

Jimmy Lee clasped the Bible to his chest with both hands. “Do tell. We don’t need outsiders, Chief. Nor want them either.”

And I thought Southerners were supposed to be hospitable. We nodded at each other, the preacher and me, but he seemed to have his mind on other things. I made a mental note to talk to him later, he being the deceased’s next-in-command.

“Git her back where she belongs, Willie,” he said, floating away with the others without another word.

We turned to walk up the hill, the blonde with her head down the whole time.

As the mourners passed, their looks seemed harsher than their words, which were few but well-aimed. Especially from other young women, of whom there appeared to be quite a lot.

“Gas too good for you, sister,” one hissed. A redhead, amply endowed, judging from the balcony under her raingear.

“Church’ll never be the same without him,” croaked another. She was young too. Her hair wasn’t red but her eyes were. Or at least they looked that way to me. Unless she was shedding crocodile tears. I couldn’t tell in the rain. Who can?

I skipped behind Hendrix to walk on the uncuffed side of the accused.

“Sorry about your loss, ma’am. Husband, I gather?”

“Late husband, you mean.” Her head was still down.

“The name is Dawkins.”

“I know who you are.”

"I'd like a word with you at the Graybar." Picking up the local lingo pretty fast.

She looked at me with that soft look, her eyes less steel-blue than blue flannel now.

"It's not like my dance card's all punched, you know."

"Right. Going straight back, are you?"

She lifted her right wrist and with it Hendrix's left. "You think he's taking me to the movies or something?"

"Yeah, well, he's got the authority, he wants to."

She stopped suddenly. I walked another step or two and so did Hendrix, which put her in a rather awkward position, like a kid shut out of musical chairs.

We stopped, the top cop and I.

"Problem?" he asked, backpedaling. The mourners passed, quiet now, heads down, plodding uphill toward their cars.

"Not for me," I said. "Just asking Mrs. Woodford when she might have some time."

"Wofford," Hendrix corrected. "That's for me to decide, Dawkins, not her."

"Right. See, that's the difference between us, Hendrix. Me, I thought it was decided, the only thing TBD being time. You told me twice already I got to go behind bars to see her."

"Syntactically, that's not the same. It's like a statement of fact, not an actual authorization."

"Coming from you it is," I said with a shrug. "Shall we approach the bench?"

Hendrix shaking his head, missing my jibe. "Keep the judge out of it. We get back, I'll give you an hour."

The widow chiming in. "Don't I have a say in this?"

"You don't exactly have a vote right now, Mrs. Wofford."

"I told you, the name is Cunningham," she said, her eyes half-shut in anger. "Please stop using my dead husband's name."

"Still your legal name."

"Not if I say it's not."

I looked at her when she said that. Her eyes were sharp and steel-blue again. Turning to Hendrix I said, "Put the cuffs on me, Willie. Chain me to her and we'll talk in the back while you drive."

"Shut up, Dawkins. Chiefs don't drive."

"Right, I forget. You got people who do that for you."