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MEETING DARKNESS

Prologue

The victim knew nothing of being murdered. Knew nothing of the killing flames that consumed family treasures. The thickening haze hid books, pictures, the way out. Smoke from the fire did its lethal work while the victim lay fast asleep. A merciful death, to be sure.

But a death all the same.

Chapter One

October 1995

Luggage? Check. Computer? Check. Duffel bag full of precious cards and photos she hadn't wanted to entrust to the movers? Check. Item by item, Laurie Kilcannon inventoried the contents of her car, right down to her purse and the offer letter from the Inn at the Cliff.

She had everything on her list.

Am I crazy, Laurie wondered? Leaving Connor Pharmaceuticals, leaving the career I love? Moving 400 miles away for a job and a man?

Well, maybe it was good to be crazy for a change. And after all, she reminded herself, meeting planning's not that different from Conference Services. Opposite sides of the same coin, really. She already knew hotel-speak. Knew the challenges meeting planners faced. The things she'd need to learn – how the biggest hotel in a small town worked, what the different demands were in Barcliff – she'd figure out soon enough.

Barcliff. Cape Cod. With winter coming on. How different would it be from the summer resort she'd eagerly escaped to one week every summer for so long? Colder than Philadelphia, that was for sure. Lonelier too, probably.

She shook her head and took a last look around her hotel room, a space so devoid of character that leaving it gave her no qualms. That's no attitude to start with, she admonished herself. Barcliff represented a whole new future for her. A new career. A new romance. New friends. No flying! Who knew what could happen there?

She shut the door behind her, quickly settled up at the front desk, and got in her car.

Laurie started her long drive north, not looking back.

Tim Riordan stepped out of his police-issue Crown Victoria and greeted Emily at the switchboard-cum-operations-center of his small station.

As always, he marveled at the contrast between the tight black curls of Emily's wig and her 70-year-old face, powder etching each wrinkle into sharp relief. Did she really think she was fooling anyone?

He shook his head, abandoning the speculation as he climbed the narrow stairs to his brown-paneled office.

His office. His station. And if he didn't exactly love the aged Crown Vic that came with the post, it did have "Chief of Police, Barcliff" stenciled on the door. After three months back in Barcliff and on the job, he still got a kick out of the title.

Tim sipped strong coffee from a Barcliff P.D. mug, glanced through his messages, looked at his appointment calendar for the day... This morning, he had to meet with the town's Board of Selectmen about the Founders Day ceremonies. Then he was slated to attend the opening of the Barcliff Youth Center. Lunch with some local Chamber of Commerce leaders. A speech in the afternoon at the nearby high school. He'd made sure his schedule was clear after 4:00, though.

He looked at his watch. 8:45 am. Drummed his fingers on the desk. Busied himself with his mail. Training bulletins. Law enforcement gear catalogs – prices for billy clubs were going up, he noticed. A few letters from business owners, mostly about parking problems. The station was too damned quiet, that was the problem.

A few of his officers were out on routine calls, he saw as he thumbed through the morning's reports for both the police and fire departments. 53-year-old female who fell on the sidewalk. Fire would be in on that, for the medical stuff. 68-year-old male with chest pains. That would have gone to Fire too. The usual off-season issues. Nothing his staff couldn't handle. Hell, he thought, even Stafford, fresh out of the Academy, could deal with a 73-year-old female's trapped kitten.

He took a sip of now-lukewarm coffee. The station was too quiet, he thought again, and his meeting with the Selectmen wasn't due to start for more than an hour. His role at Founders Day would be largely ceremonial anyway, with his officers handling crowd control. The real involvement would come from Fire, especially Ray Fortacelli, the chief. Founders Day always included a bonfire.

That's it, Tim thought. I'll call Fort. See what he's up to, if his station is as quiet as mine this morning. Before he could pick up the phone, however, his intercom buzzed.

"I have Chief Ray Fortacelli here to see you," reported Emily in an incongruously professional voice. "Shall I send him up?"

Tim pressed the button.

"Of course you should send him up!" he said testily.

"Yes, sir," came her prim reply.

Moments later, Ray Fortacelli entered his office. Or at least, Ray Fortacelli's belly entered his office, followed eventually by Ray himself.

"Fort! I was just going to call you!"

"No need, as it turns out, eh, Tim? I don't know about you, but I'm bored to tears. My station's dead as a doornail this morning. I'm hungry, too. Want to grab a real breakfast before the Selectmen's meeting? You know they'll just have day-old Danish."

"Absolutely! Harry's?" he asked, naming the best diner in town, already imagining the omelet he'd order.

“Done,” said Fort. “Elena just gives me twigs in the morning. How’s a man supposed to sustain himself on Bran Buds, I ask you?” He was already imagining the omelet *he’d* order. With hash browns and extra bacon on the side. After all, a man had to eat, didn’t he?

“Mr. Hufnagel let us know you were coming,” said the front desk clerk. “You’ll be in Room 23 for the duration of your stay. Four weeks, I believe?”

“Yes,” replied Laurie. “I’m hoping to find a place to rent after that. Will it be hard, do you think?”

“Oh, it shouldn’t be – not for the off-season, anyway.” Laurie was about to ask what would happen come springtime when the clerk asked about her luggage.

“It’s in the car. I parked in back, like they said.” Then, thinking of her three suitcases and numerous duffel bags, she added, “I think I’ll need a cart.”

“Of course. James?” The clerk summoned a waiting bellman with close-cropped hair and big ears. “Ms. Kilcannon’s our new Director of Conference Services. She’ll be staying at the hotel for a month while she looks for a place to live, so she’ll have a good bit of luggage, I’d guess. Room 23.”

Laurie wondered how much to tip the bellman. She may be a fellow employee, but she didn’t want to alienate the bell staff on her first night. She wanted all the allies she could get.

James proved to be friendly, professional – and talkative.

“So you’re staying on property for a month? That’s a great way to learn where everything is. You’ll be an old hand in no time. That was Christa on the front desk. She’s one of our day people, works 7:00 am to 3:00 pm,” he volunteered on the brief elevator ride as she held onto a duffel bag perched on her suitcases. “I don’t know if you’re an early riser or not, but Donna, who covers the desk from 11:00 pm to 7:00 am, has some really great stories.”

“Stories? About guests?”

“Oh sure. But mostly about the ghosts. The Inn is one of the most haunted buildings on the Cape. We’re not supposed to tell the guests, but you’re staff, so I figure it’s okay... Here we are,” he announced, asking her for her key so he could be sure it worked. “Room 23. It’s on the small side, but you’ll find it very comfortable. Queen-sized bed, gas fireplace, iron and ironing board in the closet, as well as extra blankets if you want them...”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I heard you right before. Long drive and all that. Did you say ‘ghosts’?”

“Sure. Old Captain Muldaur and his wife Euphemia. The original part of the Inn used to be their house. Several children. Plus a few deceased guests, we think. Nothing to worry about.”

“You’re kidding, right? This is some sort of hazing for new employees?”

“No, ma’am. But some people don’t see them at all,” the bellman said, seeming to remember her position. “And they almost never appear in the sleeping rooms,” he added helpfully.

Almost never, Laurie thought. Terrific.

James brought in the last of her bags. “I hope you enjoy it here. If you need anything at all, just call the front desk from your room phone. And if you want an outside line, just press 9. Have a good night, ma’am.”

“Please – it’s Laurie,” she said, handing him a folded bill.

He started to refuse the tip, on the grounds that she was a fellow staffer, then saw the denomination on the bill.

“Thank you very much, ma’am!”

“No problem. Thank *you*. But truly, it’s Laurie. Especially since we’ll be working together.”

“Whatever you say, ma’am.”

Laurie sighed.

Alone in her room at last, she wondered how she’d ever manage to fit the contents of her bulging suitcases into the few drawers provided. The closet seemed to be taken up by a safe (like she had any valuables, she thought wryly), a hairdryer, and the extra blankets that made her wonder just how cold it would get. It was only mid-October, and she was already freezing.

Finally, she dug a long-sleeved t-shirt, heavy sweatpants, and toiletries out of a duffel, resolving to unpack the rest of her clothes tomorrow. There was an iron, after all.

It was only 5:00 pm, but she was tired from the long drive. What she needed was a second wind and some food.

She picked up the room phone and dialed out.

Chuck brushed peanut shells off the bar with his left hand while drawing a glass of Sam Adams from a tap with his right. The bar was beginning to fill up, and he spotted several of his regulars.

“Hi Priz, Dan, Mike,” he said. He nodded to another group as well. “Evening, Joe,” he acknowledged a rail-thin man at the end of the bar. “Evening, Brian.” Chuck always found it difficult to believe Brian was a fisherman with his perfectly trimmed beard and neatly-pressed khakis. “How was the fishing today?”

“Same as always,” answered Dan, whose too-tight overalls and plaid shirt combined with a bushy red beard to make him look like an overweight lumberjack. “Catch a little on the thin side. But we brought up a lobster too – don’t tell the regulators. Lobster stew tomorrow, I think. Is that beer for me?”

“Not unless you ordered it,” Chuck retorted.

“Well then, pretend I ordered it.”

“Next one’s yours,” answered Chuck, putting a fresh glass under the tap. “How’s it going, Priz? Where’s Tess tonight? We haven’t seen her yet.”

“Still at work. She’ll be in later, I expect. Must be nice for her to live over a bar!”

“Yeah,” put in Mike, his ever-present baseball cap obscuring his eyes. “If you moved in with her, this place’d get even more of your money than it already does!”

“I’m workin’ on it, boys, believe me,” Priz responded. And who knew? Maybe Tess *would* let him move in one of these days. Not that he wanted to tell the whole bar.

“So Chuck,” he said to change the subject, “What’s gonna happen to this place now that old Sturgis kicked the bucket?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Priz. I’m just glad to have a job. Hope they don’t turn it into a tourist bar, though. Blond wood and ferns and nautical prints on the wall – ugh!”

He much preferred the ramshackle décor of the bar at the Widow’s Walk the way it was: license plates on the walls proclaiming customers’ allegiance to the doomed Red Sox, hand-lettered posters advertising high school plays, neon beer signs and car racing pennants fighting for space. Gloomy lighting from a few dull light bulbs, augmented by the neon. Peanut shells on the bare plank floors...

“I need two Sams, a Merlot, and a vodka martini with 3 olives,” interrupted Maggie, blowing her bangs out of her eyes.

“Coming right up,” answered Chuck. As he poured, he glanced over at the table she was serving, aware that Maggie’s perfect skin, wavy dark brown hair, and curvaceous figure always drew glances.

“Are those guys behaving themselves?” he asked anxiously.

“They’re with their wives. Or girlfriends. Or something. Anyway, Dad, didn’t you promise not to get all protective on me when I switched from bussing tables to waitressing?”

Sighing, he put the drinks on her tray as she placed her food order at the computer terminal.

“This thing is so cool,” she remarked. “I’m glad the Walk finally made it into the 20th century. We’ve had these at the Boat Club for a year. Oops – gotta go. Three more two-tops just walked in.”

“Are you coming right home after your shift?”

His daughter looked briefly awkward.

“Well – no. I’ll probably meet a friend later. I’ll be home early, though. I know I’ve got to catch the bus tomorrow.”

“What about homework?”

“It’s senior year, Dad, and I’ve already taken my SATs. Besides, the teachers aren’t giving us much this week. Don’t worry so much, okay? Listen, I really have to get to those tables.”

She hurried off, leaving her father to wonder who the “friend” was that she was meeting tonight. He couldn’t wonder for long, though. Off-season or not, the bar was filling up.

“The chicken, some potatoes, and a salad will be fine for tonight,” Elizabeth called into the kitchen. “And could I have some tea, please?”

“Of course, ma’am,” replied Mrs. Hayes. “Will Master Billy be eating at home this evening?”

“Yes,” answered Elizabeth, a trace of a smile appearing on her thin lips as she thought of her adopted son. So much more congenial than her real sons. And daughters.

“Maybe I should whip up that cranberry-apple cobbler he likes, then,” the cheerful woman replied. “That boy can surely eat!”

“So he can. Cobbler would be lovely. I’m sure he’ll appreciate the effort. Now, tea?”

“It’ll be ready in just a minute, ma’am. Why don’t you go change and I’ll have it waiting for you when you’re done.”

In her spacious, high-ceilinged bedroom, it took Elizabeth only a few moments to unhook the tweed skirt she’d worn that day and don more comfortable slacks. Pumps were replaced with loafers, thick pantyhose with thicker socks. Her turtleneck sweater looked fine with both. She wore no makeup and no jewelry, save the double strand of pearls that went with every outfit she owned. Her hair remained drawn up in its customary bun. She only released it when she went to bed.

The room seemed unusually cold, even for the Cape. She made a mental note to ask Nathan to check on the house’s heating system, then turned on her space heater.

She thought she heard the front door open and close, although it was hard to tell. On entering the cavernous living room, she did in fact see Billy.

“Mère!” he greeted her with an exuberant hug. None of her other children would have done that, she thought to herself. As always, the name they’d agreed on pleased her. Not “Mom” – that would have been inaccurate. But a word that meant “mother” just the same. And in French too.

“Is Mrs. Hayes still here? Or should I order in for us?”

“Yes, I’m here, Master Billy,” said the middle-aged woman in her New England-accented voice as she wheeled in a creaking butler’s cart. There were scones and butter for Elizabeth and homemade chocolate chip cookies for Billy.

“Those look great!” enthused Billy, eyeing the cookies and helping himself to a cup of tea.

Mrs. Hayes tried to stop beaming and look stern.

“Well don’t eat too many now, or you’ll spoil your appetite. There’s chicken and baked potatoes for dinner, and that cobbler you like for dessert.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. H., I’ll find room,” he laughed as he started on his second cookie, having devoured his first while she was talking. Elizabeth was still buttering her scone.

“How was business at the gallery today?” she asked, even though she’d been there herself for much of it. She spent most of her time in her office, placing and receiving phone calls from artists and collectors of equine memorabilia, avoiding her gallery manager. Nothing wrong with the woman. Elizabeth just didn’t like many people. She relied on Billy for day-to-day news of the business.

“Pretty usual for October, Mère. Not many tourists, of course. A couple of locals, a few washashores looking to furnish new houses. Scott and I rang up \$1,300, maybe.”

Elizabeth wondered again if it had been wise to promote Scott from the back room to the sales floor. After all, he wasn’t exactly “one of them,” but he seemed to be doing an acceptable job so far. And he *was* Billy’s best friend. For now. Billy would grow out of that eventually, she hoped.

She frowned briefly, then asked, “How was school today?”

After her shift, Tess boosted herself up into the cab of her pickup truck. She lit a long-craved cigarette and blasted rock music on her radio, reveling in the feeling of being herself again. She’d shed the anonymous white smock she wore at work, changed from the crepe-soled shoes her boss mandated into her favorite knee-length leather boots, and dug in her pockets to replace the seven earrings she’d removed before arriving at the Inn.

A short ride brought her to her apartment. The Walk was packed as usual, and she guessed Priz would be in there. Straight upstairs to the relative peace and quiet of her place, or into the loud and crowded Widow’s Walk? She debated with herself for a good twenty seconds.

Nathan Cobb had had a bad day. On leaving his cottage on the Farraday Estate that morning, he noticed a flat tire on his ancient Ford. Nathan grumbled as he changed it.

When he arrived at the gallery, Suzannah Berlinger greeted him by saying that the toilet was stopped up, and could he fix it? A dirty job, to say the least. One that involved rubber gloves, day-old human waste, and many vigorous applications of a plunger.

Nathan grumbled as he repaired the toilet.

Several hours later, Suzannah looked in on him. “Oh, you’ve finished!” she said brightly. “Would you mind driving down to Providence to pick up two sculptures we just bought? I’ve got the address right here, and Mrs. Farraday wants to add the pieces to our inventory as soon as possible. She thinks there might be a buyer among the washashores.”

“Fine,” grumbled Nathan with his permanently sour expression. He’d have to stop by an auto parts store first and buy a new tire.

The drive to Providence was okay, Nathan had to admit. Light traffic, no snow or ice, and he found the artist’s studio with a minimum of trouble. On his way home, he was emboldened by his earlier success and steered his truck confidently onto the highway.

Nathan’s run of luck proved short-lived, though. There were no fewer than three accidents on I-95, plus one on the approach to the Bourne Bridge. He didn’t reach the gallery until almost sunset, 4:30 pm.

He was about to pull in to the alley next to the Ryder Gallery, used only for deliveries, when he noticed a car parked there. Out-of-state plates, naturally. The washashores thought they could do anything, he grumbled to himself.

No doubt about it, he’d had a bad day.

“Welcome home, *caro*,” Francesca smiled as she greeted her husband. “Was the drive difficult today?” she asked, stealing a look at the clock.

Clayton kissed his wife and visibly relaxed. The whole first floor, as always, smelled fantastic, and he wondered what Francesca had prepared for dinner. He’d told her they could easily afford a cook, but she always refused, saying she liked to recreate the meals of her native Italy in their warm, well-equipped kitchen.

He glanced around the room, drawing solace from the homey farm table in the corner and the handmade tiles depicting Italian fishermen that took up one wall. The other walls were painted a pale, soft yellow that seemed to evoke Neapolitan sunshine even on the dreariest Cape Cod days.

“I got hung up in traffic near the bridge,” he answered. “What’s that glorious smell? Or did I miss dinner?”

“Of course not, *caro*! You are just in time. But your before-dinner drink will have to wait until after we eat. I was late getting home myself, so I only made a pasta puttanesca for tonight. Is that all right? It has shrimp instead of anchovies. I know you do not like them.”

“Sounds great – and it smells even better. How can I help?”

“Thank you for offering! Let me now see. The table is set, and the puttanesca is ready. I have the bread warming in the oven, and the salad is prepared. Could you perhaps open the wine? I thought some Chianti Classico would go well.”

“No problem,” answered Clayton, heading to the door of their wine cellar. “It’s on the right?” came his raised voice after a minute.

“Sì, on the lower racks,” Francesca called.

Back in the kitchen, Clayton opened the bottle to let the wine breathe as his wife heaped his plate with the fragrant pasta before serving herself.

“How were your classes today?” she inquired eventually, after they’d both had a chance to eat.

“Oh, much as usual,” he said. “We’re doing Renaissance masters at the moment. I gave them a pop quiz.”

“Popquiz? What is that?”

Clayton smothered a grin. Sometimes he forgot that Francesca’s English wasn’t quite fluent.

“A ‘pop quiz’ means a sudden test, one the students weren’t expecting and wouldn’t have studied for. I’m sure you remember them. It’ll be interesting to see how they do.”

“I am sure they will get very good marks. You are a wonderful teacher, after all,” she smiled, remembering her own time as one of Professor Farraday’s students.

“Thank you, Francesca – but I may have made a special effort with your class,” he admitted with a grin. “So how was your day? Anything new at the Inn?” he asked as he started his salad.

“Not extremely much,” she answered, surprised. Usually Clayton didn’t bring up the subject of her working, no matter how many times she insisted her part-time job was just something to keep her busy while he was at the college. “There is a group of pharmaceutical company executives coming in next week, though. Perhaps one of them will buy something.”

“Got anything particular in mind? What artist is the gallery featuring this month again?”

“We decided not to highlight a specific painter this month,” she replied, warming to the topic Clayton had uncharacteristically raised. “Instead, we are focusing on a theme – ‘Down to the Sea in Ships.’ We could not afford that Melbye that was offered at auction last month, and of course we cannot get a Monet like ‘Red Boats at Argenteuil,’ but we do have several seascapes by local artists that are very lovely. One of the Provincetown galleries might want them, and they are affordable as well.”

“Sounds interesting. Maybe I’ll stop by your display if I can find the time.”

“That would be wonderful, *tesoro!*” It seemed like he was finally acknowledging that it was acceptable for her to work outside the home. After all, there wasn’t much else for her to do until the babies came. Perhaps he’d be willing to change his mind on that topic also...

“Do you have plans for us this weekend?” she asked innocently.

“Haven’t made any. Why?”

“Perhaps we could have your sister and her family over for dinner. Bob loves my spaghetti Bolognese, and I could make pizza for the girls. And we could invite Harrison, too – I do not think he is getting many homemade meals these days.”

“Always with the food! It’s a miracle you stay so slim! How about inviting Tess and Priz too?”

“I would love to, but would they come?”

“Good point. Well then, Jane, Bob, the girls, and Harrison. I’ll call Jane and Harrison and see if they’re free. It *has* been a while since we got together.”

Francesca beamed. Jane and Bob’s daughters were adorable and well-behaved. The more Clayton saw them, the better.

“Now,” her husband asked, “What’s for dessert?”

“Can I get you two some drinks?” asked Maggie.

Tim replied distractedly.

“Why on earth did you want to meet here?” he asked. “I’d cleared my schedule and was ready to make you a Welcome-to-Barcliff dinner and everything. I thought you might enjoy some time, you know, *alone*,” he added, glancing around the crowded bar.

“I’m sorry, Tim,” replied Laurie. “It was just such a long drive today. I thought this would be the easiest thing for my first night. I’m bone-tired, and I start my new job in two days.”

Tim looked closer and noticed her blunted expression, a sure sign of exhaustion. He switched gears.

“So how’s the Inn?”

Smothering a yawn, she said, “As beautiful as I remembered it from my interview... all that mahogany and teak. It’s kind of amazing, after spending so many years going to big chain hotels. The Inn at the Cliff has so much more character!”

She frowned suddenly.

“A little *too* much character, actually. The bellman who took me to my room said the place is supposed to be haunted! By an old sea captain, dead guests – you name it. I’m scared to take a shower!”

Tim burst out laughing.

“I’m sure the ghosts won’t bother you. But remember, it’s not their fault they’re dead.”

Laurie looked dubious.

“James – the bellman – said that some people don’t even see them. The ghosts. Boy, I hope I’m one of those people!”

Tim busied himself with his soup.

“Best clam chowder on the Cape. I used to dream about this when I lived in Miami. So aside from your fear of a ghost in the shower, how’s your room, anyway?”

“Small, with all my stuff in there. But getting it for free is terrific. Gives me a chance to learn the property while I look for my own place.”

She said that carefully, even though she’d made her position clear months ago.

“You could always move in with me, you know. I’ve got plenty of room,” he added hopefully.

“Tim, we talked about this. And as grateful as I am for the offer, I’m just not ready. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. But you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“How was *your* day?” she asked, eager to change the subject. “It seems like all we’ve been doing is talking about me!”

“Oh, pretty slow,” he responded, confident she’d change her mind about moving in with him once she’d priced some Cape Cod rentals. “It’s the time of year. Some traffic violations, a domestic dispute or two. Come summer, we’ll be hopping, but for now – well, nothing exciting happens in Barcliff in the winter.”