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*Monday noon:*

Amy Goodheart sailed out of the Managing Editor's office, moving across the newsroom on feet that seemed too small to support her weight. A tsunami of Obsession preceded her. From a distance she appeared the same as always—a large capable woman in her mid-thirties. Up close her face showed traces of smeared mascara and tear-stained foundation. Cheek muscles sagged over a strong jaw, adding ten years to her face. Someone who'd lost her best friend.

I jumped from my seat and hugged her, trying without success to keep her big, teased hair out of my nose. "I'm so sorry about Connie," I said, struggling not to sneeze.

She gave a wrenching sob, reached across my desk for a Kleenex and poked it under her tortoise shell glasses. "This is just the worst thing that ever happened. I still can't believe it."

"When did you find out?"

"The sheriff called after I got back to the office. He'd been trying to reach me all morning, but I had my cell off." She pointed to one swollen cheek. "First a root canal and now...this." Once again she mopped her eyes.

"Tough day," I agreed, brushing her cheek with my fingers. Hot to the touch. "Hurt much?"

She grimaced. "Like a son-of-a-bitch." A plump freckled hand flew to her mouth. "Sorry."

"That's okay. I've heard it before. Amy, why don't you go home for the rest of the day?"

She held up both palms in a don't-go-there sign. "No way, I'm a professional and I'm better off here than moping at home. Besides, I need to hear everything that happened this morning. Come on." She turned and waggled her fingers over her shoulder.

Oh dear, I really didn't want to have this conversation.

We sat on opposite sides of an enormous desk heaped with papers. Amy rummaged in the drawer, leaned across and thrust a snapshot at me. "This is from our high school graduation party."

I studied the washed-out, Reagan-era photo. Two girls in cap and gown beamed into the camera with the confidence of youth and the expectation of long and happy lives. A tall, reed-slim Amy, her hair platinum and straight, stood shoulder to shoulder with her equally tall, dark-haired pal. They toasted the person behind the camera with bottles of Coors in a classic pose that proclaimed "Hey, we made it!"

"I didn't know you drank," I said, surprised. I studied Amy and the photo, trying to reconcile this image with the woman who now refused anything stronger than Diet Pepsi.

Amy stiffened. "I don't, not now. Connie, on the other hand..." She let the sentence dangle and I wondered why, but did not ask.

I studied the photo more closely. Connie's eyes seemed too sad for such a happy occasion, like she knew her life would end tragically, even then. Maybe I was reading too much into a simple snapshot. "Have you known her all your life?"

Amy's ample bosom rose in a sigh. "Since first grade. Connie's parents lived in Mexico City for several years before she started school." She grimaced. "The Evil Twins were born there."

"'Evil twins?' Why do you say that? I know Raymond's a jerk, but I've never met Rik."

"Haven't missed much." She shook her head. "Those nasty little boys made Connie's life a living hell."

"Brothers can be a trial, I'm sure."

"You don't know the half of it. And," here she paused, "you don't want to."

"Okay." I returned the photo without further comment and slumped in my chair, sorry for a life snuffed out so soon. Connie was the oldest Mercado sibling and only daughter. A simple person and a free spirit who loved to party, she'd turned her back

on the lifestyle her family's wealth made possible. Why else would she drive an old Subaru like mine and run a thrift store?

"Were you still there when they retrieved her body?" Amy twisted an oversize topaz ring on her pinkie.

"Yes, but I didn't see much. I was at the visitor's center across the road giving my statement to the deputy."

Amy blinked a bit. "On the phone earlier, Sheriff Whitley said he was in Sacramento for a conference but that he wanted to break the bad news himself. "

"That was nice of him."

She tapped a pencil on the desk. "It was."

"I don't know if I should say this—"

The pencil paused mid-tap. "Bella, I want to know *everything*."

"Well, it looked like she went straight off the bluff. The car got wedged between it and the rocks. Connie was thrown clear."

"Oh my God." Amy cradled her head in her hands for a few seconds, then took a sip of water through a straw, wincing when it hit her tooth. She pulled the straw out of the glass, looked at it with distaste and tossed it in the wastebasket. "Where did she go over?"

"In that spot where the surfers and hikers park, on the ocean side of the visitor's center. Her body was on *Las Tablas*."

She shivered. "The way they pull up so close there, I've always thought a car would take a nose-dive someday. Did anyone see her? There must have been other people around."

"There were two cars, both empty. Probably surfers."

"Well, she didn't commit suicide, that's for sure." She added as though to herself, "Not now."

Like her earlier comment about Connie's drinking, this seemed like a private thought and I didn't pursue it. "She may have been the victim of"—how could I say this?—"of foul play."

Amy's blue eyes widened behind her designer frames. "Foul play? You sound like *Law and Order*. If you're talking murder, say so in plain English."

Amy always spoke her mind. I gulped, trying to swallow the memory of this morning's terror. "When I was driving out there, a guy in a Hummer tried to run me off the road. I think he may have mistaken me for her. He was on a cell phone in the Mercado driveway."

"No shit?" Amy grimaced, I assumed at her accidental use of the expletive. "What did the deputy say? Did he find paint on your car?"

"No. He said they'd look into the matter."

"That's *it*?"

"For the moment."

She focused on a spot over my left shoulder. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Do you think Connie was murdered?"

"God, I hate to say this, but it sure looks like it. I just hope law enforcement gets on the stick." A sigh. "Honestly, don't they watch cop shows? If a murder isn't solved in the first forty-eight hours..."

"Maybe you should remind Sheriff Whitley of that."

Amy peered at me over the top of her glasses. "No wonder they kicked you out of the convent. You're too sassy to be a nun."

"I didn't get kicked out. I left."

Gazing into space, she didn't reply. Finally, her red-rimmed eyes came back to me. "Do you think the guy in the Hummer was the one who tipped you off about the sewer plan?"

"Amy, why would you even ask that? I have no idea." My voice sounded sharp and angry. "I do think the caller three weeks ago must have been on a cell. He kept breaking up. But today I was trying to *avoid* Hummer Man, not have a conversation with him for cripes sake."

"Don't get huffy. I just asked for an opinion." Another long silence then, "Bella, it's over."

My heart knocked against my ribs. It does that sometimes. Warns me when something's not right. "What's over?"

"Leaks, protests, editorials. They're part of the newspaper

game, but possible murder sends this thing into a whole new league.” Her eyes darted to the thin side walls, and she leaned forward. “You don’t know the pressure I’ve been under. Powerful people want the sewer on the Mercado land.”

“Including Raymond Mercado? Mr. Money Bags himself?”

She shrugged like it was too much to think about. “Could be, I don’t know. Advertisers have threatened to cancel accounts. I don’t have to tell you I can’t let that happen. Especially with all this talk of a merger between our parent company and that other news organization, whose name I can’t bear to think about, much less mention.”

“What are you saying exactly?”

“From now on the paper’s going to remain neutral on the sewer issue. And I want you to back off your soapbox.”

I felt the heat in my cheeks. “Back off? And if I don’t?”

Her eyebrows went up a notch. “Then things would become awkward between us.”

“Seems like what I do on my own time is my business.”

“Normally it would be, but this is a real hot button issue. Look, promise me you’ll at least talk it over with Mike. Looks to the world like you have a conflict of interest, with his business and all.”

I nodded. My husband would be looking for a job after everyone hooked up to the sewer. For that reason alone I needed *my* job. “Okay, I’ll talk it over with Mike.”

“Good.” Amy stood up to signal the end of our meeting. “I want you to give Ben a statement, but only about Connie and the incident itself. Don’t mention the guy in the Hummer.”

Ben Adams was a new hire whose journalistic skills left me cold. He’d been covering the Los Lobos sewer debacle and couldn’t seem to get a handle on either the technology or the political situation. After reading one of his articles, I’d think: What was *that* all about?

Amy thought he was Pulitzer material. “Thought maybe you’d let me write the story,” I sniffed.

Amy shook her head, releasing a fresh wave of Obsession. “I need experienced writers on a story like this.”

“Okay fine. Whatever.”

“Bella, act like a grownup. I hired you because I thought after twenty-five years in social work you’d bring a compassionate voice and some maturity to the obituary desk. People, especially people with problems, feel comfortable talking to you.”

“I see.” I wasn’t about to be swayed by the compliment.

“Do you?” Another head shake, more Obsession perfume. “You are aware that your predecessor was just nineteen?”

I nodded, wondering where this was leading. “She was a disaster. The last straw was when she added, ‘You go girl!’ to the obituary of a lady who passed at a hundred and five. The family was not amused.”

I giggled in spite of myself. “At least she had imagination.” Editing the tortured prose that relatives wrote for departed loved ones—or writing it myself—had been a challenge at first. After a year and a half I was running out of clever ways to say “went to his/her eternal reward.”

“I’d like to work into a reporter job.”

“We’ll see.” Amy walked around the desk and lifted the ends of my cropped hair. “First we need to make your image as sharp as your tongue.”

“*Mine?*” I placed a hand on my chest.

She laughed. “Yours. Why don’t you let me send you to my hairdresser? A little color to cover the gray, a good razor cut and you’d look less like a...” She stopped.

“A nun?”

She grinned, warming to her task. At least it took her mind off her friend. “Some Gucci frames would set off those big brown eyes.” Her glance moved to my feet. “I don’t believe in dress codes, but those Birkenstocks are way too hippie looking. And a pair of heels would make you seem taller.”

She had a point. At Holy Name, they called me Sister Munchkin.

“Mike prefers me the way I am. He finds nuns sexy.”

“You’re *sure*?”

I gave her a smile that I’m sure was a bit smug. Mike’s love was one thing I could count on. “Absolutely.”