

Endangered

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The Poisoned Pencil



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One

The call came through at six thirty a.m. Some cops had found a blood-splattered shack, off a country road in the scrubby woodlands east of Halifax.

“Looks like we’re going to need Major Crime out here,” I heard an officer tell dispatch through the crackly static of the newsroom scanner.

“Copy that. Are you in danger?”

“Negative. The place looks empty. Couple of ATVers stumbled across it in the middle of the night.”

“Copy that...*static*...What is your 10-20?”

I wrote down the details of the location in my notepad as the cop gave directions to the dispatcher. Then I grabbed a Diet Coke from the fridge beside the copydesk. Normally, I laid off the caffeine a few hours before the end of my overnight shift. But it looked like bedtime might be delayed that morning. Especially if the cops found a body.

To be honest, I was surprised there hadn’t been more action on the police scanner that night. Most of the high schools in Halifax—including mine—had held their proms last evening, and I’d expected at least one drunk-driving accident to punctuate my night shift. But then, what did I know about

high-school graduation parties? I wasn't entitled to graduate, thanks to a bombed biology exam that nixed my chances at a diploma from Sir Robert Bordon High School—aka Boredom High. So while the rest of my classmates were glitzing it up in the Lord Nelson Hotel ballroom, I'd been sitting in the newsroom all night, updating the paper's website with overseas wire-copy, monitoring the police scanner, and checking Facebook every ten minutes to see which of my friends were making out, breaking up, or getting hammered.

Yeah, I would've liked to have been at the prom. But I couldn't have cared less about a high school graduation certificate. The only piece of paper I wanted to hang on my wall was a National Newspaper Award.

I stuffed my phone, notepad, and digital recorder into my purse, grabbed my camera, picked up the phone on my desk and dialed the first digit of Tenzen's number. I thought twice and hung up the phone again.

Not that Tenzen would mind being dragged out of bed at six thirty a.m. to check out a blood-covered shack in the woods. The grizzled old cop reporter lived for that kind of stuff. In fact, he'd expect me to call him. Just like I'd expect him to call me if a murder story broke on his shift—send me knocking on doors in hopes of finding an eyewitness, or assign me to cover the police press conference while he pumped his off-the-record sources for the inside scoop. For the past year, I'd been Tenzen's unofficial apprentice. I had nothing to complain about. I'd learned a lot of stuff and skipped a lot of classes—which explained why I'd bombed that biology exam. But whenever a big crime story appeared in the paper, the byline always read: By Rod Tenzen. Then, way at the bottom, in italic letters: *with files from Hayley Makk.*

Not this time. This was my shift. My story. My byline. I could handle it on my own.

I sank into the driver's seat of my '98 Pontiac Firefly and cranked up some tunage to keep me awake on the drive to the crime scene. I'd trashed my savings account to buy the car as a non-graduation gift to myself after I got the results of my biology final. If I was going to keep living at home while other kids went off to university, at least I deserved my own set of wheels. It was a three-cylinder convertible with an orange paint-job that camouflaged the rust around the wheel wells, with a tape deck instead of a CD player. After I'd gotten it home, I'd dragged out a cardboard box filled with my dad's cassette tapes to see if I could find anything worth listening to. I'd rescued a couple of albums by The Clash but the rest was lame old people's music—Madonna, Boyz II Men, Celine Dion. Seriously. Celine Dion.

It was one of those gray Halifax mornings where the peaks of the Victorian rooftops poke through the fog like a scene from a cheesy teenage vampire movie. I turned into the empty downtown streets to the opening drum roll of "I Fought the Law" and reached the highway on-ramp by the song's final crescendo.

There wasn't much traffic except for the occasional logging truck or heavy rig, but I kept an eye out all the same. There were bound to be a few bleary-eyed grads on the road, trying to make it home from the after-hours parties before their parents woke up and found them AWOL.

The rising sun made a smudgy gray thumbprint in the overcast sky. Shreds of fog clung to the tree branches and the early summer cornstalks in the fields. About thirty minutes out of Halifax, I turned on to Concession Road 14 as per the cop's directions, passed some rocky sheep-pastures and drove

through the wooded hinterland until I spotted a cruiser parked on the dirt shoulder. The Clash was rocking the Casbah as I pulled up behind it. I took a last gulp of Diet Coke and got out of the Firefly, scuffing my combat boots in the pebbles of the road's shoulder.

Two cops stood at the entrance to a narrow dirt path, which was tied off with yellow police tape. The older one was big and beefy, with a cleft chin and gelled gray hair. He looked ticked off that someone had the nerve to stick a crime-scene out here in the godforsaken woods—and at the end of his night shift at that.

The second cop looked friendlier. I guessed he wasn't much older than some of the guys in my class—though I knew you had to be nineteen to join the Mounties—which made him a year and a half older than me. He had the body of an athlete, an oval face, and a brown forelock that fell in a fringe over his left eyebrow. I figured I'd try my luck with him, rather than attempting to strike up a conversation with Officer Beefy over there.

"Morning, Officer. Hayley Makk, *Halifax Independent*." I flashed my notepad at him. "Can I ask you what's going on here?"

The young cop didn't say anything, but turned to look at his partner.

Sergeant Beefy shrugged one shoulder.

"Talk to Media Relations," he growled.

Thanks for nothing.

I made a point of looking at my watch. "Yeah, it's seven-thirty. The Media Relations desk doesn't open till eight."

The beefy cop shrugged both shoulders this time. Maybe he was making twice the effort to respond. Or maybe he was doubly indifferent. Whatever the case, it wasn't helping me get a story.

“I heard on the scanner something about a shack, covered in blood,” I said.

“Whatever you heard, you heard.”

Thanks for nothing. Again.

“Can you tell me who owns this property, Officer?”

“Land registry office opens at nine,” Sergeant Beefy grunted. He gave me a look like I was too young to play reporter, and I should be home listening to lame pop music and texting my boyfriend.

Maybe I should’ve called Tenzen, after all.

“Yeah, so I could go look it up, right?” I said. “So why don’t you just tell me? I won’t quote you. Promise.”

Sergeant Beefy stared straight ahead, like he’d developed an overwhelming interest in the scrawny birch trees across the road. I had an urge to duck under the police tape and make a break for the cabin to get a front page photo, but I had a feeling he’d tackle me like a linebacker the instant I set foot on the path.

The young cop shot me a glance of what seemed like sympathy. He probably had to deal with a lot of attitude from Sergeant Beefy on a regular basis. I gave him a little smile, like: *Hey, I get it, my editor’s just as hard-assed as your partner, and he’s gonna chew me out if I go back to the newsroom without a story, so do you think you could give me a little break here?*

The young cop glanced at his partner, whose eyes were still glued on the scenery across the road. He pulled a notepad out of his breast pocket and flipped a couple of pages.

“Chiasson,” he said. “Her-me-ne-gilde.”

His tongue stumbled over the old-fashioned name.

“How do you spell that?” I asked.

“I don’t.” He cracked a grin.

Cute. Very cute.

“Anything else you can tell me?” I wasn’t expecting much, but the young cop nodded his head to the side, indicating a couple of teenage guys sitting on a log in the woods, about fifty feet away.

“Those guys. They found the place last night. You’ll want to hurry, though. One of their moms is on her way to pick them up.”

“Thanks, Constable,” I looked at his name tag, “Turpin.”

I handed him my business card.

“Pleasure,” he nodded, tucking the card away in his breast pocket. “Don’t quote me.”

I tromped through the woods in the direction he’d indicated. Birds chirped in the trees, trying to convince me that this was all a scene from a Disney movie, but the two guys sitting on the log didn’t look like charming princes. As I got closer, I recognized them from my class in school: Phil Brewer and Chuck West.

Phil’s lanky blond hair fell in a dirty tangle around his chalk-pale face. He wore a once-white dress shirt and black dress pants, caked to the knees in mud. Chuck had an Irving Oil baseball cap shoved backwards on top of his mess of brown hair and wore the same style of black pants and white shirt as his friend. But he was glammed up with a purple cummerbund and a purple bow tie that clung crookedly to his collar, barely hanging on through what had obviously been a rough night.

“Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Hayley,” said Phil.

Chuck didn’t say anything. He looked like he was going to barf if he opened his mouth.

“Rough night?”

Phil nodded: “Yeah.”

“Cops said you found a shack in the woods, covered in blood.”

“Yeah,” said Phil.

“Totally covered,” added Chuck, looking green.

“I’m writing about it. For the paper.”

“Oh. Cool,” said Phil.

“So, can you tell me what happened?”

Phil shrugged.

“I dunno. We just found it.”

“Okay. How’d you find it?”

“We were out ATVing.”

“This was after the grad party?”

“Kind of. Chuck’s girlfriend dumped him.”

“At the dance,” Chuck put in.

I knew the girl he’d been dating, Clarissa, a semi-hysterical princess-type. It would’ve been totally typical of her to dump a guy at the prom. Probably didn’t like his purple cummerbund.

“Bummer,” I said.

“Salright,” Chuck mumbled.

“So, I took him out ATVing, eh?” Phil continued.

“We were kinda drinking,” Chuck added.

“Cause, what else are you gonna do?” said Phil.

“Right,” I said.

“So then the machine gets stuck in the mud, eh?”

“Swamp,” Chuck corrected him.

“Whatever. We were kinda lost...”

“And drunk,” Chuck put in.

“And then we found this shack. So it was like, let’s just crash here. And when we woke up...”

“Holy shit,” said Chuck.

“Holy shit,” said Phil.

“Holy shit, what?”

“Blood,” said Chuck. “Blood everywhere.”

“It was all over the walls and all over the floor and everything. I mean, I been in hunting cabins before where there might be some dried blood on the counter or the table, eh? But this was everywhere.”

“Gory,” said Chuck.

I scribbled the quotes in my notepad.

“So, what’d you do after that?”

“Puked,” said Chuck.

“Right,” I said. “And afterwards?”

“Hiked out to the highway,” said Phil. “There was this trail and besides, we could hear the traffic. So we flagged down a trucker, eh? And he called the cops.”

“What’d the cops say?”

“They asked us a ton of questions. Then they said they were gonna call some more investigators.”

“Okay. Thanks, guys.”

I got them to pose for a couple of pics, while a police van pulled up and some men who must have been crime-scene investigators got out. Just as I was finishing up taking pics, a blue SUV pulled on to the shoulder of the road near the cop cars. A lady in a tracksuit got out and made a beeline for the cops. She looked jumped-up on stress, with a bad case of bed-head.

“That’s my mom,” said Chuck.

“Okay. Call me if you hear anything else.” I gave him one of my business cards, then headed back to the Firefly. I figured it was best to leave the scene before parental authority showed up and advised the kids not to speak to the media.

Besides, I had my quotes. I had pics. I had enough for a story. Maybe a front page story.

Heading back toward Halifax on Concession Road 14, I passed a white CBC-TV van making for the crime scene. But

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the SUV carrying Chuck and his buddy was already on the road behind me, and I doubted the cops would give the CBC any more information than they'd given me. I recognized the reporter driving the van and waved as we crossed paths.

Ha. I thought. Scooped ya.